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of

MEN

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NO SHORTAGE OF MEN

By ETHEL HUESTON

Prudence of the Parsonage
Prudence Says So
Prudence's Sister
Prudence's Daughter
Leave It to Doris
Eve to the Rescue
Merry O
Swedey
Coasting Down East
Idle Island
Ginger Ella
Ginger and Speed
The People of This Town
Birds Fly South
For Ginger's Sake
Rowena Rides the Rumble
Good Times
That Hastings Girl
Blithe Baldwin
Beauty for Sale
Star of the West
The Man of the Storm
A Roof Over Their Heads
Calamity Jane of Deadwood Gulch
High Bridge
The Honorable Uncle Lancy
Uncle Lancy for President
Preacher's Wife 1897
This One Kindness
Drink to Me Only . . .
Mother Went Mad on Monday
No Shortage of Men 96

No Shortage of Men

by
Ethel Hueston

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CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
I. ELLENA	9
II. THE COLONEL	55
III. EILEEN	65
IV. THE DUCHESS	100
V. ELLENA	110
VI. THE DUCHESS	126
VII. ELLENA	135
VIII. EILEEN	149
IX. THE GENERAL	163
X. ELLENA	167
XI. THE GENERAL	182
XII. EILEEN	192
XIII. ELLENA	198

NO SHORTAGE OF MEN

I. ELLENA

1

WHEN I got home after the day's refined grind at Miss McAllister's Secretarial Institute, Mother was sitting in the most uncomfortable chair in the living room, tapping one foot on the Chinese prayer rug. She was not doing anything. Just sitting there, tapping one foot. That was unusual. Ordinarily she was upstairs touching herself up for the evening, or in the dining room touching up the table in her own inimitable way.

This time she was just sitting there, tapping her foot.

"Your grandmother is back," she announced curtly.

I was on instant guard. In our family, when we refer to one another as "your grandmother" or "your father" or "your daughter," there is the devil to pay somewhere, somehow, somebody. To us Grandmother is "Gram." When we are pleased with her or wish to be affectionately insulting, we call her "Duchess." "Your grandmother" boded ill and I knew it.

"Is she here?" I asked.

"No. She is in Washington. I don't know when she got there, but there she is. I hope you have no vital engagements for the week end. She wants us to go down immediately for a family conference."

"I can't go this week end," I said firmly. "Now listen, Mother! Be reasonable. This has been planned for weeks. I am going to spend the week end in New York. We bought our theater tickets two months ago and it's dinner at Jeanie's and a tour of night clubs afterward and all night with Florry and she's having a waffle-poker breakfast at noon and——"

"We are going to Washington for the week end. Your grandmother wants us."

"She doesn't want me," I argued. "Nobody wants me for family conferring. What's the matter? Is she sick?"

"I haven't the faintest idea what is the matter. Here is her tele-

gram. It just says she is there and requests—or commands—that we go immediately. She wants your father, too, and he will be furious, called away from whatever it is he thinks he ought to be doing for the war up there in Boston. But after all, she is my mother and we can't very well refuse."

"But I don't have to go, Mother! I can stay with Florry. I can go in tonight. If it's business she wants to talk about, I'll just clutter up the traffic. You and Dad go. Tell her I'll come later. Four weeks from this week I haven't a thing planned. Tell her I'll come then."

"Ellena, I am surprised at you," she said coldly. "Your grandmother has always been lovely to you and you must admit that she hardly ever asks anything of us. This telegram asks something of us. She asks that you, your father and I hurry down there and it is important. I don't like it any better than you do. I have engagements, too. And your father will be furious."

I doubted that. I realized that being in the war and a colonel, maybe he couldn't get away on such short notice, but he wouldn't be furious at Gram. He was partial to Gram. He was always saying why hadn't he met her before he ran into Mother; a polite way of saying he liked her.

"But, Mother," I went on arguing though I knew I was wasting my breath, "if she had to get reservations clear back to Washington from California, she must have known weeks ago when she was coming. Why didn't she let us know and give us time to make decent arrangements? Why didn't she come home through New York? She could have come home this way just as cheaply and not put us to all that expense and inconvenience——"

"Ask your grandmother," she said.

I could see that she didn't like it a bit better than I did. "My generation," she went on, "was brought up to have respect for its elders and when my mother asks me to go, naturally I shall go."

She gave me a hard look and I tried another line.

"If it's so important, why don't we send Dad? He knows more about important things than we do. She probably just asked us out of politeness anyhow."

And then, as a brilliant afterthought, I added hopefully, "And we can tell him to bring her back with him for a nice long visit."

"She asked us to come there, and mentioned us specifically, by name. Your father may refuse to go. After all, the army is a good alibi. I shall not refuse. And," she added, "I think you will not refuse."

Well, I wanted to refuse. I wanted to like the dickens. But I couldn't very well, not openly. I had another brilliant thought.

"Mother, why don't you call up His Excellency and ask what it's all about? It can't be anything important or she wouldn't have asked for me. Get the low-down from His Excellency and if she's sick of course we'll drop everything and pop right down. But call him up and find out——"

"Your grandfather is in Russia!"

"In Russia! He would be! He's just the type. His only wife, his only daughter, his only grand-brat in a jam like this and he's gorging himself on caviar and vodka in Russia."

I looked at Mother indignantly. It didn't do any good. She was looking just as indignantly at me.

"What does the telegram say?" I asked, more mildly.

"Have returned to the well-known roost. Your father is in Russia. Very important that I see you immediately, you and Ellena and Dave. Come tonight if possible but not later than tomorrow. Everything okay so do not worry. Let me know what train."

Two words in that telegram stuck out like a sore thumb. "Your father." She always referred to Grandfather as "the iron duke," or "Pimpernel."

"Maybe she really is sick," I said uneasily.

"She says, 'Everything okay so do not worry.'"

"Yes, but you know what a liar she is," I protested.

"Well, I suppose I must call your father," she said drearily.

I knew something was wrong. All those "your fathers" and "your grandmothers" couldn't be laughed off. Something was certainly wrong.

"I suppose the war has gone to her head," Mother said irritably. "She still thinks she won the last one—all that nursing-aid stuff and Red Cross, bed-panning and alcohol-rubbing. She probably wants your father to get her an overseas assignment."

"Not at her age!" I expostulated.

"The trouble with her age is that she doesn't acknowledge it. Well, I'll call your father."

It took quite a while to get him and from Mother's attitude at our end of the line I inferred that it was a particularly bad moment for him to be got. Mother read the telegram. She read it again. She read it a third time.

She told me afterward that he seemed worried about His Excellency.

"In Russia, huh? They've probably got him in a concentration camp. She very likely wants me to use influence to get him out alive. She doesn't realize there just isn't that much influence to be had!"

He could not leave that night but he would not let Gram down in such a crisis. He said he would wangle things somehow or go AWOL if he had to and would meet us at La Guardia Airport next afternoon at two. Mother reminded him that he would have to get the tickets as we were mere scum-of-the-earth civilians with no priority rating. He said he would attend to it. He called back a little later and said he couldn't get the air reservations but had them for the train and we should meet him at the Pennsylvania Station at two.

"Well, that seems to be that," Mother said to me. "Do you want the telephone for your cancelations or shall I go first? I'll call your grandmother later."

It put me in a foul position, having to break all those dates I'd made weeks before. You know how it is when you begin backing out of things at the last minute: your friends quit counting on you and begin asking other, surer people and for weeks you have to make all the overtures and pay more than your share of the bills until you get your standing back.

I went through it, though. I was really devoted to Gram and I was sure that nothing less than winning the war would have prompted her to put me in such a ridiculous position. I played things up as well as I could. I explained that we had received word that my grandfather was in a concentration camp in Russia and might never get out alive and that my dear little old grandlady needed me. My friends were quite sympathetic and told me to be brave and remember that

the poor old gentleman had lived a full and useful life and there couldn't be much future ahead of him anyhow.

I listened attentively while Mother phoned Gram in Washington but I didn't get much out of it. Mother didn't get much out of it either. Gram said she was fine; that as far as she knew "your father," though in Russia, was still intact; that we'd better take a taxi up from the station as she was out of coupons.

Mother looked resentfully at me as she recounted this conversation. I reciprocated.

"It seems to me," I said reproachfully, "that if you were on the approved daughterly terms with your parent, you could have got more out of her."

"Do you consider yourself on approved daughterly terms with me?" she asked.

"Well, yes, I think so," I said, with some doubt.

"Well, you're not getting as much out of me as you think you are," she said cryptically.

Upset. We were very much upset.

As far as I can remember, we, our family, took the steps to war just like everybody else. I was in high school when Italy shook her gory locks at Ethiopia. It was the pet subject in our debating club and we declaimed with gestures and no end of rhetorical questions that somebody ought to be doing something and was the League of Nations asleep at its switch? Our honorable opponents shouted back hotly that it was none of our business; let decadents murder decadents if they wanted to; and as for the League of Nations, hadn't we rightly and wisely repudiated it from the beginning? It made a good subject for debate with plenty to be said on both sides of the fence.

We were infuriated when dear little Czechoslovakia was sold down whatever river it was on and in time the Polish Corridor was more important to us than the vestibules at school and motion pictures. But there wasn't anything we could do about it. We didn't try to do anything about it. Nobody else seemed to be trying, either.

We shed actual, literal tears over Dunkirk and the Battle of Britain

and began joining things and contributing part of our allowance for useful war purposes and taking first-aid and civilian-defense courses. When it came to Pearl Harbor we were fighting mad and aghast but not frightened. We were rather thrilled at the declarations of war. We had been so pure about everything. We *had* to declare war; it had been rammed down our gullible throats. And almost overnight we became war-minded a thousand percent. We gave more of our allowances and started more clubs and began collecting bundles and saving scrap paper and tin cans.

My father, who had gone to West Point long before he met me or Mother either, and had served in the other war, was yanked out of his neat little job and chivvied back into the service. But that was more exciting than anything else, because they stepped him up to a colonelcy and his uniforms were lovely. He had always, because of business, been away from home a great deal, so Mother and I stayed on in our house in West Orange while he dashed around over the country getting refresher courses and taking orders and learning that war isn't what she used to be.

I finished high school and went to Miss McAllister's Secretarial Institute. I had really wanted to take a course in dramatic art with an eye on the movies, but dramatic art seemed frivolous in the face of war so we compromised on the Secretarial Institute.

Mother and I joined every good cause we were invited to join and contributed modestly whenever we were asked to contribute. We signed up for civilian defense and rolling bandages and Mother took a nurse's-aide course, to take the edge off Gram and the last war.

Gram had been up to see us a time or two but mostly she stayed at home in Washington and His Excellency got out his brief case and his best clothes and went to South America on some kind of a mission.

He was not really an ambassador; he wasn't even an excellency. But he was some kind of an expert on some sort of intricate economic problems and knew his way round in politics, too, so he was always being sent somewhere on missions.

In earlier years Gram had gone with him a good deal and they took me on a couple of lovely trips. But he was not an ambassador. He wasn't anything official. However, he was so patently important

and so pleased with himself that we called him the Ambassador or Your Excellency. And he didn't mind. He liked it.

When he went to South America, Gram wrote that she was going west for a little mountain air and sea breeze. That did not surprise us. She often went tripping off places. She knew a lot of people scattered around over the country and for a woman her age managed to give herself a rollicking good time. She was gone four months. That didn't surprise us, either. She did not write often but she picked up cute little presents for us, in Colorado and New Mexico and California. She even wormed her way up to Canada and sent me some after-dinner coffees that had been engraved with the Duke of Windsor's picture when he was on the verge of being king and when the switch-around came they couldn't use the china in England and it was marked down for a song in Canada. Lovely china.

All perfectly normal. That is, perfect wartime normalcy. And to think it had to be my grandmother and His Excellency who jolted us out of our normal doldrums into the midst of war as it is waged.

Dad met us at the station as planned. We knew he would be there. Dad was the kind of person who was always where he was supposed to be at the exact minute he was supposed to be there.

Mother had read the telegram over the phone to him three times but he insisted on seeing it. He was the kind of person to doubt everything he hadn't seen with his own eyes. Then he made Mother repeat exactly what Gram had said about His Excellency's status in Russia. Only she hadn't really said anything; just that he was there and presumably intact.

Ordinarily I like travel. Especially when I travel alone. And it isn't too bad going either with Mother or Dad, one or the other. It's ghastly going with both of them. Perfectly all right they are, my parents, but they had reached that dreadful stage where they never dreamed of being interesting to each other. Polite, always polite. But dull. They saved their bright sallies and good stories and smart cracks for an outside audience. Either of them, with me alone, was quite gay and entertaining, and with their friends they were vivacious and bright. But with each other alone they were duds.

So, just as I expected, the trip to Washington was sickeningly dull.

I couldn't even look around with any real interest, because when they were together they ganged up on me parentally, watching me with a shrewish or wizardish ancestralism that took the edge off anything worth looking at.

We got to Washington and took a cab up to the house, a nice house on Twenty-eighth Place just off Massachusetts Avenue. It was a very nice house. Big enough for all of us when we were there but not too big for Gram and His Excellency when they were alone.

Hortense, Gram's colored maid who had known me before I was born, met us at the door. She hugged me as usual and shook Mother's hand and said beamingly to Dad, "Howdy, Sa'geant Dave, sir, how's the wah?"

"Colonel Dave, Hortense, if you please," Dad said pleasantly.

We were very fond of Hortense.

"Yessum, I know, Mr. Dave suh, but the finest sojer I ever see was a sa'geant and in my pussonal opinion there ain't ever nothin' can really superintend a high-class sa'geant."

"You've got something there, Hortense," Dad said. He was laughing.

But it struck me afresh that something was very wrong somewhere and Hortense knew it.

All this little rigmarole had been according to schedule except that Hortense kept her head tilted slightly, listening; listening toward the upstairs.

She put our bags in a corner of the vestibule to be taken upstairs later, hung our wraps in the hall closet and led us into the living room.

"A little drink, maybe, Kunnel sa'geant, suh," she suggested. "Cocktail, Miss Eileen?" to Mother. And to me: "Still milk for you, honey chile, or is you done graduate' out of one bottle into another?"

"Sherry, please," I said loftily.

"Is Mother sick, Hortense?" Mother asked as she started away.

"No'm, no'm, Miss Eileen, she ain't sick. She be right down."

But she was still listening toward the upstairs as she went away.

I looked around. It seemed a strange, unfamiliar room. And yet it was the same room. The fireplace, the piano, the tables, the divans—all familiar. But it seemed a strange room.

Then from the top of the stairs, "Hello, below!" Gram's voice.

We hurried out to the foot of the stairs to meet her as she came down.

"Nice theatrical entrance, Duchess," Mother said. "Why don't you try your hand at the movies?"

Gram looked the same. Or almost the same. Silvering hair, well kept; slim hands, impeccably manicured, on the mahogany stair rail; slim, straight figure, smartly gowned; friendly eyes; smiling lips. The same? Not quite the same.

But she was laughing and we hugged and kissed her. She made us mad once in a while but we really doted on Gram. Mother was Gram's child and Mother's child was me. Gram was small and slim, a scant five-four. Mother was taller, perfectly figured, five-seven. I was an inch taller, a little too thin for beauty perhaps but fashionably thin. I was eighteen, Mother thirty-nine. Gram was sixty.

Sixty! Think of living long enough to be sixty years old!

We went into the living room, that room which was so familiar yet seemed so strange. We sat down and smiled and Hortense came in with the tray and beamed around at us. She patted my shoulder and said, "Now listen, Honey, course you's a big gal now but you could do a lot worser'n stick to the bottle you began with."

Still she kept her head tilted slightly—not upstairs now but toward Gram. Listening? Or was it watching?

She went away slowly, almost reluctantly, looking back with troubled eyes.

"Your telegram scared us, Duchess," Mother said. "Is anything wrong? Has anything happened to Father?"

"Not so far as I know," Gram said, delicately sipping her sherry. "I didn't mean to frighten you. I had thought we might save the necessary disclosures until after dinner but since it is on your minds we may as well get it off our chests immediately. I felt I should tell you myself before you stumbled across it somewhere outside, from some friend or from the papers. Be calm, Eileen. It's nothing to get excited about. Your father and I are divorced."

We sat there in the most awful silence imaginable.

"D-did you say d-divorced, Mother?"

"Yes. It was all very quiet and respectable. No scandal. But

eventually you would be bound to run into somebody. And a squib might crop up in the papers, unimportant though we are."

I tried to think of something to say, something casual, nonchalant. But what can you say when a grandmother you dote on informs you that she is divorced from what you have always considered a very swell grandfather? I couldn't think of anything. Dad couldn't either. That left it up to Mother, who, after all, had known her much longer than either of us.

"Mother, do—do you think it is really wise—at your age? Have you considered it carefully? After all—you can hardly have fallen in love with somebody else—at your age," Mother remonstrated feebly.

"Now let's straighten the record immediately," Gram said briskly. "I have not fallen in love with anybody. And yes, I did consider it carefully but not at any great length. Your father said he wanted a divorce. So I went west and got it. I just thought you might like to know," she ended drily.

"Do you mean you've already—got it, Mother?" My mother sounded half-hysterical, although normally a very calm person.

"Certainly. That's what I was doing out west. He said I could get it here on the grounds of desertion, but I have my pride and at what you so persistently refer to as 'my age' I refused to be humiliated by desertion. I got it on the grounds of incompatibility. When a man says he wants a divorce, I consider him absolutely incompatible."

"What did he want it for, Gram?" I asked, and I was whispering.

"I haven't the faintest idea."

"Didn't you ask him?" Dad said explosively.

"Certainly not. I didn't consider it any of my business."

Duchess to the core!

"The old fool probably fell for some slick trick of a stenographer," Dad said angrily. "You should have waited, Ellen. He's bound to come to his senses eventually."

There it was again! Those strange names. I had never heard Dad call her Ellen.

"When a man to whom you have been married forty years asks for a divorce," Gram said with quiet dignity, "I should consider it

most niggardly to keep him waiting. After all, he has little enough time left for whatever it is he wants to do."

I was in a perfect daze. If it had been Mother and Dad I think I could have understood it better because they so obviously bored each other. But Gram and His Excellency had never bored each other. They always laughed together. They always had more to talk about than there was time for talking. They had good times and made everybody around them have good times, too.

Or had they been bored? Had it all been pretence between them?

People say that youth is conservative. We don't like that. We like to feel we are liberal and emancipated, a little ahead of our time and away ahead of our parents. But I was conservative enough to feel there was something downright indecent about grandparents gadding about the country getting themselves divorced. I was ashamed. I was so ashamed I thought it would serve us darn well right if we lost the whole war, having sunk to such depths that people who should be thinking of snug berths in heaven were scrambling around the world looking for fresh love affairs.

"It must be the war, Gram," Mother said faintly. "Everybody is so nervous and wrought up about everything. It must be the war."

"If the war went to his head, he could shoulder a gun and get himself shot like a gentleman, couldn't he?" Gram asked sensibly. "You don't need a divorce to fight and die for your country."

"Anyhow, Duchess, you have nothing to worry about," Dad said comfortingly. "You just come right along and live with us and more than welcome."

"Live where?" Mother asked. "If she can live with you, it's more than Ellena and I can manage to do. We've hardly seen you since the war started."

"Oh, she can follow me along from camp to camp," Dad said cheerfully. "She won the last war almost single-handed; she'll certainly take this one in her stride. My barracks shall be her barracks and my C rations hers."

Gram laughed. "Thanks, Davie, but I do not anticipate starvation. Not yet. I have two hundred and fifty a month and he turned the house over to me. I can rent it at a profit whenever I want to. I may have to let Hortense go."

"So *that's* what she is afraid of!" I said suddenly. "That's why she keeps listening. She couldn't bear to stop running you, Gram; she's had you in the hollow of her hand so long. I'll snatch back my allowance from Red Cross and USO and help you pay Hortense."

"Thanks, Ellena. I'll remember that. But there is no immediate emergency."

"If the Russians take a dislike to the color of his eyes, you'll be a legitimate widow in no time," Dad said hopefully. "That would simplify matters a good deal."

"Not for Pimpernel," Gram said.

They laughed.

I did not laugh. I knew now what was the matter with the room. His Excellency was gone—his portrait, his favorite chair, his humidor. Other things had taken their places, things he would probably have chucked smack into the garbage, nice things but different; not his. His Excellency was gone.

"Dinner is served," Hortense said, and we went to the dining room.

I have not quite done Grandfather justice. He was a gay and charming man. He loved people, he loved life and laughter and lovely things. He knew all the beautiful places in the world and many of the exciting characters playing their parts on its far-flung stage. When he had sat at the head of his table, even when the guests were ordinary friends and rather dull, he carried them along with him into a kind of salon maelstrom where they laughed and said keen, amusing or tender things they would probably have denounced as libel once they were out of his presence.

When I had been there, as I often was, and we three ate alone at that table, the conversation was a little over my head but not so far overhead that I did not feel excited and entertained and lifted up, and when it was over felt as stimulated as if it had been a party. He had that gift. And Gram had catered to it.

He was dictatorial. He wanted everything run his way and run right; and that was the way things ran. He was a little old-fashioned, I think, but so gay in his old fashion and so proud of it, that he made it seem a fine art.

We had been at that table, we four with Hortense in attendance, many times when he was away on his fabulous missions. But his

presence had always been there. We had talked about him. We asked questions, Gram gave exaggerated accounts of his more recent carryings-on, Hortense chiming in with small details she overlooked. Tonight there was none of that.

His Excellency was gone. Gram, at her age, was a divorced woman. And I was ashamed to the bottom of my heart.

Dad did his best. He was always at his best in their house. That night it was an effort but he tried. He talked more than usual, recalled more amusing anecdotes, was quicker in repartee than I had ever known him. Gram rallied gallantly. Mother was no help at all. I realized that she must be distressed, though apparently so calm. After all, His Excellency was her father. This woman at the head of the table, Gram, a divorcée, was her mother.

After dinner we went upstairs. We said it was to unpack our bags and get settled, but really it was just to move around, do something, relieve the tension.

"What room are you using, Gram?" Mother said diffidently.

"My own, of course! Why not? It's the best room in the house and has the best bed. Why shouldn't I use it?"

We went to the door and looked in. It had been their room, their room together. It was a lovely room, a large, bright, happy room. It was the only room in the house, except the maid's room on the third floor, that had a private bath.

Their room, but subtly changed. The big luxurious double bed still stood in the eastern alcove, now strewn with silken cushions in delicate pastel colors, the dainty bedside lamps wearing matching shades. His Excellency had abhorred frills except on women. The reading lamps of his day had been handsome but sturdily wrought of bronze.

The desk remained in the opposite alcove but His Excellency's bronze desk set was gone, replaced by one of silver filagree and mother-of-pearl.

A low fire glimmered in the fireplace but velvet poufs had supplanted the luxurious wing chairs. Frail tables had been added. His Excellency wouldn't have endured them for a minute.

Amazing the difference it makes to a bathroom when an Excellency moves out. No more huge sponges, stout brushes, oversized

towels, heavy bottles and jars; no bathrobe over the edge of the tub; no gaudy pajamas on the door rack. Now soft pastel linens, pretty bottles, costly accessories. His Excellency was more completely detached from the bathroom than anywhere else in the house.

"You and Dave will take the guest room as usual, Eileen," Gram said quietly, as we stood, speechlessly looking. "Ellena, the little room across the hall. I think you will find everything all right."

"Gram," I said impulsively, stirred by the loneliness of the lovely room, "wouldn't you like me to stay down with you awhile? I'd love to. And I can, as well as not. We have really finished our courses and are just marking time until we get jobs so they can advertise that we stepped straight from the classroom into top-notch positions."

"Thank you, Ellena. But not right now. Later on, I'll want you. But one has a few adjustments to make and the sooner one gets them made—pouf! The sooner one is adjusted—that's all."

"Gram," Mother said, "Dave and I think you should come and stay with us for a while. Forever if you like. Dave is away all the time and we are frightfully dull, unless one considers rolling bandages exciting and I do not. But at least we can be together. We want it very much."

"I know, Eileen," Gram said appreciatively. "Dave has been wonderful about everything and I know how you feel. But not right now. I'm buckling down to it very well. I'm getting along fine. I have friends here and I know the ropes. I have nothing to run away from and nothing to run away to."

"But, Gram," Mother went on, more diffidently, "eventually—if he gets out of Russia—he will be coming back. Coming back here. Won't it be a little—embarrassing?"

"Not at all. Why should it? By the time he comes back—if he comes back—I may be away. But if I should run into him accidentally—" up went the small, slim five-feet-four—"I hope you do not think for a minute that I would lose my equilibrium."

"Well, I'd lose mine!" I said hotly. "If I ever run into him rug-cutting with some silly stenographer in his arms, I—I'll stab him with the first dinner knife I can get hold of."

"I wouldn't, Pet," Gram said, and smiled. "Blood is very messy."

It sounds heartless, but no matter how sorry you are for anyone, how much you love one, you are glad to get away in such a sorry crisis. Not exactly glad, but so relieved it is almost gladness.

We wanted Gram to go back to New Jersey with us and either Mother or I would willingly have remained with her in Washington, but her refusal was a relief to us and we were glad to be on the train going home.

Dad was disturbed. "I can't imagine what came over the old fool," he said several times.

He had always loved Grandfather, just as we had. Now the beloved Ambassador was "another old fool" who had lost his head over some pretty clerk or movie actress. We were sure it was that. Dad said it couldn't be anything else. When a man like His Excellency goes haywire, he said, you can jolly well bet there is some dizzy blonde in the background. Mother and I thought so, too.

We were anything but happy about it.

And it was a little tough on me, trying to explain to my friends that Grandfather was not exactly concentrated in Russia but had upset the family applecart by getting himself divorced. My friends were sympathetic about that, too. They said they had always heard Russian women were like that. Ravishing. Irresistible. The toughest-hearted male was wax in their lily-white hands.

None had met any Russian women but all had been advised that the only way to hold your man was to steer him clear and wide of Russian women.

We wrote to Gram regularly. She wrote to us, too. But where before we had thought her letters gay and amusing, with flippant accounts of teas and bridges and a lecture or musicale thrown in occasionally for good measure, now they seemed only brave and pathetic. Not gay, not amusing; just taking her own private little war on the chin.

Dad dropped us in New Jersey and went on up to Boston, still shaking his head over the incomprehensible conduct of the poor old

fool. We did not see any more of him than before but he wrote more often. A few weeks later he was shifted down to Fort Jackson in South Carolina but as it seemed to indicate that another step was in the offing we did not worry about it. We couldn't have seen less of him if he had been in Iceland, so mileage made no difference.

In the middle of the summer, when the Secretarial Institute finally washed its hands of me and Mother advised against my going to work until fall, he wrote that he had a nice hotel apartment lined up and invited the three of us, Mother, Gram and me, to come down and spend a month with him and give ourselves a time.

Mother declined without even rereading the invitation. She said South Carolina did not agree with her hay fever. Gram telephoned from Washington that she would get a real kick out of chaperoning me for a while so I went down. Gram met me at the station. She looked about as she always did. Maybe there was a little difference. She wasn't enough older for time to show on her, but divorce leaves a mark, too; sometimes a drab mark, sometimes vivid; but it leaves a mark.

If I have to tell the truth, and I suppose I might as well, I was glad Mother did not go. She had developed to an exaggerated degree the habit of looking at me askance as if I were some strange visitation that had come upon her, willy-nilly. It depressed me. Gram looked at me askance, too, but with an air of sly benevolence as if I were no worse than she might have expected.

So we went down to Fort Jackson. Dad was delighted to have us, the hotel apartment was all right, and things went off very well. We met a lot of people who were nice to us but no nicer than we were to them and a couple of weeks passed very pleasantly. But nothing really happened.

Then Dad telephoned in and said there was going to be some special speechmaking and he was sending the car to bring us out. Neither Gram nor I cared for speechmaking but he said this was something extra special, as indeed it was. No less a person than Winston Churchill had consented to make a few remarks in passing.

Our seats were not very good, way near the end of a long line, but at least far enough away so the minor introductory remarks wouldn't distract our attention from the columns of young men lined

up smartly in their best uniforms, eyes slanted right. I am fond of uniforms, so I looked at them attentively. There was one in particular—I counted the line—the fifteenth to the left of a second lieutenant. His eyes seemed to be glued where they were supposed to be glued but I did not think so. I am intuitive about such things. He looked nice in his uniform, slim and straight and stern. Of course they all look nice in their uniforms, slim and straight and stern, but he stood out. He definitely stood out. His sternness looked as if it were trying hard not to break down and smile. His eyes which should have been slanted right, I was sure were slanted slightly left. I sat slightly left.

It sounds rather brash to say that a man who could be looking at Churchill and a lot of generals would be looking at a girl twenty seats off center.

"He can't be looking at me," I told myself, looking hard at him to make sure. "It's an optical illusion. Somebody would smack him down if his eyes were lefted when they should be righted."

But nobody could smack me down so I went on looking at him. I can't remember a word Churchill said. I wouldn't even be sure he spoke except that everybody said so. And after a while, too soon, it was over. Heels clicked, eyes fronted, companies about-faced and they marched off. He looked strictly military but I was sure the slight lift of his right eye and the right corner of his lips was for me.

We milled around awhile with some people we knew and went to the Officers' Club but I was in a blue daze. I was in a genuine army-regulation quandary. Dad was a full colonel with a step-up just around the corner and I, unfortunately, was his daughter. I couldn't decently go around inquiring who stood fifteenth to the left of the second lieutenant in the front row.

I took a long chance. "Dad," I said, frowning thoughtfully as if my sole interest was in military procedure, "does the army keep records of men who stand in certain spots in certain rows at special events?"

Dad laughed. "What do you think we are, the *Follies*? Or a Murray offshoot teaching 'em to dance in a hurry? No. We are just one jump ahead of the chain gang. We don't go entirely by number but darned close to it."

"Then nobody could conceivably figure out who stood—well, say fifteenth to the left of the second lieutenant in the front row?"

"Only himself and God," he said good-naturedly. "His sergeant would know. His officers might, especially if he had been in trouble a good many times."

He dismissed the subject smilingly, but Gram cupped her small chin in her small hand and regarded me reflectively.

I was stymied. We went to a dance at the Officers' Club that night and it was a perfect dud. When we got home Gram tucked me into bed and remarked casually, "Ellena, if there's anything you want, there's always a way to get it; and if there's anything you want to know, there's always a way of finding out. Don't forget that. And," she went on, in perfect imitation of Hortense, "in my opinion they's nothin' on God's green earth can superintend a high-class sa'geant."

But he wasn't even a sergeant. He was just the fifteenth uniform among thousands of uniforms.

I did the best I could. I went everywhere. I hounded the camp until if it hadn't been for my first-class credentials they would probably have thought I was an A-1 spy. I wished I was an A-1 spy. An A-1 spy could have run him down in five minutes. But I was just a common American girl with a terrific yen for somebody who could have been anybody.

But I did my best. I strolled the streets. I went to movies. I frequented "resorts," the better ones, as much as I could without reflecting on Dad and shocking Gram into a discourse on what she thinks will be a better world. I had coffee at all sorts of odd places. I consumed hamburgers and hot dogs at diners. I admired flowers in the parks. But I didn't see him and in a few days he became only the memory of a particularly nice-looking uniform among uniforms.

Finally it happened. It happened so simply and so unexpectedly that I am still aghast at the casual way Providence works, its wonders to perform.

It was a drizzly day. There was nothing to do. I was too fidgety to read and the radio was sickening.

"Ellena," Gram said suddenly, "I hate to bother you but the weather seems to be clearing and I am badly in need of a spool of thread to match this shade of fuchsia. Would you be nice and grand-

daughterly and dash around to a few thousand stores and see what you can find?"

"I'll try," I said dispiritedly.

I put the little smudge of silk in my bag and went down in the elevator. Just as I stepped out of the hotel, the sun broke through and set the mist aglow. I should have known it was an omen.

I started across the street to walk down on the park side and there he was! The fifteenth to the left of the second lieutenant! He was sitting on the stone wall right across from the hotel. I could have seen him from our windows.

As I walked toward him I reminded myself that I must not be bold or brazen about anything—but after all, he was the fifteenth to the left of the second lieutenant and Providence had planted him on the park wall where I couldn't possibly miss him.

I got across the street and turned to pass him. "Oh, excuse me," I said apologetically.

It was sheer inspiration. I hadn't done anything. I hadn't stepped on his feet or jostled him or dropped my gloves. I hadn't done a thing. But I couldn't say "Hello" to a stranger and I had to say something. So I said, "Excuse me."

His reaction was perfect. He got off the wall, took off his hat and said, "Pardon me, but could you tell me where Grove Street is?"

"Grove Street," I repeated thoughtfully, as well I might, having never heard of Grove Street. "I am afraid I do not know exactly. I think I've seen the sign. Perhaps it is down this way, the way I'm going. I will show you."

We walked sedately to the corner and looked at the sign. It was not Grove Street.

"I'm terribly sorry," I said regretfully. "I don't know the town very well; I am only visiting here. Perhaps it is on the other side of the park."

So we walked down that block and looked at the next sign. It was not Grove Street either. We laughed cheerfully over it.

"Third time's the charm," he said hopefully. "It's almost sure to be the other side."

So we walked another block. No Grove! And there was our hotel looming ahead of us.

"I really do not know the streets at all," I confessed reluctantly. "Perhaps we should ask somebody."

"I'm in no hurry to get there," he said. "Couldn't we rest in the park awhile? We've walked quite a distance and you must be tired."

"I am a little tired," I admitted. "I don't know when I've walked so far in so few blocks."

So we crossed into the park. The benches were only slightly damp but the park was deserted. I would not take the first bench we came to; it was where Gram could see me if she looked out the front window and where Dad couldn't overlook me if he happened to get home early. So we moseyed around and although it was a small park we found a bench that was almost secluded. We sat down and smiled at each other.

"My name," he said, "is Cliff Lindley."

I heaved an enormous sigh. As easy as that! After all the hours I had spent trying to figure a respectable way of finding out!

"I am Ellena Courtney," I said primly.

"Yes, I know."

"You know! You must be Secret Intelligence! How did you find out?"

"Elementary, my child, elementary. I asked a newspaperman. Newspapermen know everything."

"Yes, but how could you tell him—whose name you wanted to know? Did you count chairs from the general?"

"What a quaint idea! Certainly not! First, I tailed you to the Officers' Club. Then I grabbed my newspaperman and hung onto him until you came out. He told me who you are, where you live and that your grandmother is chaperoning you. He also told me 'no soap' because everything between two bars and two stars is looking out for you. But I figured that anyhow a GI cat can look at a colonel's offspring."

"That was brilliant of you," I said with honest admiration. "But at least you had something to point at. I didn't. And I couldn't go around asking who was the fifteenth to the left of the second lieutenant in the front row."

"Then you did see me," he said happily. "I kept thinking maybe you did and kept reminding myself sanely that in such a mob it was

a physical impossibility. Was I really fifteenth to the left of that little squirt?"

"Yes. Fifteenth to the left."

We laughed heartily, as if it were some rare joke we had played on the War Department.

"Perhaps I should not tell you," he said, "for you are probably badly spoiled already, but since that day I have spent every off-duty hour—and some hours which while not exactly AWOL were at least not strictly in the line of duty—sitting on that spot on the stone fence. I daresay I've worn it down as much as a thousand years of ordinary weather. I figured you would have to come out for air sometime."

"I come out nearly all the time," I assured him. "I'm amazed I didn't see you. I was looking—farther away. What hours do you usually have off?"

"That, alas, is a choice military secret. They never let me know in advance. But I'm always alerted. When I get them, I grab them. It's a surprising thing, but close up . . ." He stopped and looked at me severely. "Are you as badly spoiled as you have a right to be? Heaven knows, I would not willingly contribute to the favorite vice of a spoiled child."

"I'm not spoiled at all," I said indignantly. "How could I be spoiled, with my mother disapproving of everything about me on general maternal principles, and my father convinced he could win the war single-handed if he could get rid of me, and my grandmother riding herd on me day and night and my grandfather . . ." I stopped abruptly. I was still ashamed of His Excellency's utter indecency, wanting a divorce, chasing blondes, at his age!

"What about your grandfather?"

"Well, he isn't bothering me any just now," I admitted evasively. "What was it you were going to say about close up?"

"I was going to remark that close up . . . And it's a most remarkable thing! I consider it absolutely unique! An eighth to be added to the seven wonders! But I give you my word, Ellena, that close up you are even more beautiful than at a distance. If I hadn't seen it with my own eyes I wouldn't believe it."

We looked at each other.

I had looked at hundreds of men, maybe thousands. I had liked a good many. I had enjoyed mild heart throbs over some. I had flirted a little and carried on the way girls have to, to have a good time. I had been engaged twice, but not very long and not seriously. But when I looked at Cliff all of a sudden there was nobody else in the world and men weren't men any more. They were just Cliff. I came darned near crying.

"Oh, Cliff," I said, "I wish there wasn't a war."

"Ellena, there's a good deal to be said for this war. I was not enthusiastic about it before and I'm not exactly thanking God for it, even now. But since this war is in the books, I am going to be reasonable about it and take it philosophically from this on."

"Why, Cliff?"

It did not seem at all odd to be using first names like that. It was the most natural thing in the world.

"Because, Ellena, how else under heaven would I ever have found you? Do you know where I come from? Iowa. I live there. I went to school there. And once this little chore is over I expect to go back and do business there. . . . Think of it, Ellena! It took this war to bring us together."

"The same war will separate us," I said miserably.

"But not forever!" He spoke confidently. "Not forever, Ellena. Not even war, a good, high-class, letter-of-the-law war like this—on our side, at least—could be low-down enough to introduce us and then switch us onto separate sidings forever."

We were holding hands by that time. I can't imagine how we started. We were holding all four hands together, close between us. When I noticed, I remember hoping faintly that I hadn't started it. But I didn't really care.

"When will you be off-duty again, Cliff?" I asked.

"Sunday. Maybe we can arrange something. . . . I don't suppose it would be possible or ethical or at least not brass-hat military for you to go to the service men's dance Saturday night? They are having trouble getting enough girls. No officers, you know. Just us GI's, so I suppose——"

"Who is running it?" I asked breathlessly.

"The Women's Club. Mrs. Gilding is managing it. But there is an

officers' dance the same night. You'd probably have more fun——"

"Cliff, how can you be such a hypocrite!" I said indignantly. "You know I wouldn't have half as much fun!"

He held my hands, or I held his, so closely I felt they were all the same hands, not his, not mine—ours.

"Do you know Mrs. Gilding, Ellena? How could you work it?"

"Gram," I said. "If she doesn't know Mrs. Gilding now she will before Saturday night."

"And you say you aren't spoiled?" he said teasingly. "How can you fix it with your father?"

"Gram," I said again. "I don't know what argument she will use—she will probably make a patriotic duty of it. How much time will you have off Sunday, Cliff?"

"All day. Until midnight. Can you think of something we could do so you wouldn't be—well, embarrassed by a GI trailer?"

"Nothing would embarrass me," I said loftily. "I'll think of something. Or Gram will. How much time shall I arrange for? I mean, have you any other plans for part of the day?"

"Honey, if I had been invited to break bread at the White House I would cheerfully get myself bitten by a rabid dog to provide legitimate excuse. You just figure out what we can do and tell me the time. Only, please, begin it as early as you can and make it last as long as possible."

"Will you telephone me?"

"Yes."

"When?"

"Tonight. But if you have plans for the evening, Ellena, don't wait for the call. I'll keep at it until I get you but the phone service is foul. Guys stand in line for hours waiting turns. . . . And to think I used to kid them for it! 'Just for a few soft lies by A.T.&T. you stand there wearing out your GI boots!' That's what I used to tell them, fool that I was. But that was because there wasn't anybody I wanted to call up. I'll phone you tonight, but don't wait for it; it may take hours, and if you have other plans——"

"Why, I haven't any plans" I began, and then changed quickly because I wanted to be entirely honest with him. "Yes, I had plans, Cliff; I had a date. But I am going to break it. I'll wait for the

call. I'll probably be waiting for the duration. Call me if you can. Try to call me."

"I'll call you."

He took my telephone number, gave me his camp address and told me how to reach him by wire if I wanted him in a hurry.

"Something might happen to gum up the works unexpectedly," he said. "For Sunday, I mean. Don't let anything happen if you can help it. Do you know how I shall spend the day if you have to cancel me Sunday?"

"How?"

"I shall sit on my familiar perch on the stone wall and look at that very ugly hotel which houses you—but isn't ugly any more. It has big blue eyes and dark brown hair and a sweet smile and a husky little voice and I adore it. It's only fair to warn you that I expect to be a good deal of a pest. Every minute I am not seeing you I shall be sitting on the stone wall wishing I were seeing you. It's my wishing wall, from this on. It has been my wishing wall ever since I first saw you. And wishes do come true. I am terribly afraid, Ellena, that I am by way of falling in love with you."

"I'll try to stand it," I said.

Afterward I thought of several smart cracks I could have made there. "Why not?" "Who doesn't?" "Oh, I'm used to that."

But I just said I could stand it, which was an understatement. It was my heart's desire.

When it was time for him to go to catch his bus we disentangled our hands, reluctantly. I wished I could keep his with me instead of my own.

"It is customary," he said, "even in the crude barbarity of my Middle West, to escort a lady to her door. But this is war, and in the circumstances, wouldn't it be better for me to fade from the picture here?"

That made me angry. "Cliff," I said haughtily, "I consider it an honor for any man in the American uniform to escort me to my door."

He gave my hand a last little pat and smiled. "Thanks," he said, "but don't run that sentiment into the ground! It's nice to consider

the uniform a symbol, but let me do all the wearing of it as far as you are concerned."

We crossed over to the hotel and said good-by. I reminded him again to call me by telephone and he reminded me again of the service dance and Sunday. But neither of us needed any reminding.

It didn't feel like me at all, the girl who went up in the elevator and ran down the corridor to our apartment. Gram looked at me quietly. For a moment I was a little confused. I knew I must look radiantly happy because I *was* radiantly happy. And radiant happiness is not easily explainable, not when it happens so quickly. I ran over and threw my arms around her and burrowed my head against her silver curls.

"Gram, you ought to be ashamed, cooped up here in this stuffy room! It's the most beautiful world in the world outdoors! The sun is gold, the sky is a sapphire and the air is wine, pure wine."

She sat very still. "Yes," she said quietly. "Not often, but once in a while, it is the most beautiful world in the world."

"Gram, do you know Mrs. Gilding?"

I must have said it abruptly. Her shoulder went up a little, so I knew I had surprised her.

"Mrs. Gilding? Never heard of her! Who is Mrs. Gilding?"

"Oh, she is some woman's club that is giving a dance Saturday night for the enlisted men. She's having a terrible time getting enough nice girls for it. There's a dance at the Officers' Club, too, but what with all the sweethearts, wives, daughters and pickups, there are always too many women to go round. I thought maybe you could persuade a few of us girls, as a patriotic service, to sacrifice the shoulder décor for one night and help poor Mrs. Gilding out of her jam."

Gram laughed. "Do you think many of the girls you have met would rise to such sacrificial heights?"

"Some of them ought to. I will. After all, consider the statistics of it. A hundred men per gal is better odds than taking chances on what officers haven't anything better to do, especially where they are bound by protocol to dance with every ranking wife. Personally, I prefer it."

"Personally, I think your statement is a hundred percent true," she

said quietly. "Well, for the good of the service, I will see what I can do about it."

"It's done!" I cried joyously. "Dear, darling Duchess, once you put your dainty hand to the plow——"

"I turn up some good-looking serviceman," she said dryly. But her eyes showed pleasure and she was smiling.

I did not want to rush her but I had to sound her out on the Sunday proposition. She had been there before and knew the surrounding countryside. And it was something very extra special that I wanted. Something nice, but quiet and far-off, something not likely to be cluttered up with trivialities like insignia. And obviously she was in a divine mood.

"Gram, you can't imagine what a comfort you are to me," I began. "How did you ever learn to know everything about everything? I need help, darling. I need it badly. It is a crisis in my——"

The telephone rang and I went to answer it. "Hello?" I said.

"Is Miss Courtney—is this you, Ellena?"

His voice!

"Is this you?" I gasped. "Where are you?"

"In the lobby."

"In the lobby! Did you miss your bus?"

"Yes. Somehow, like a fool, I got your purse in my pocket. Or you put it there to frame me! Anyhow, there it is. So I brought it back, to cheat the MP's out of a pleasant chore."

"My purse! But how could it get in your pocket?"

"Tell him to come up," Gram cut in sharply.

"But—wait a minute—It's just my purse, Gram."

"Tell him to come up!"

"He can leave it at the desk," I argued.

"Tell him to come up or give me the phone and I'll tell him myself."

"Cliff . . . uh . . . Mr. Lindley . . . uh . . . my grandmother . . . she says . . . bring it up."

"Are you sure, Ellena?" he asked hesitantly.

His hesitation put my own to flight. "Why, of course, Mr. Lindley. Do come up. You have an hour to wait for the next bus, haven't you? Come right up. The elevator boy will show you."

Gram smoothed her skirts and fluffed up her curls with dainty

touches. I was in a panic of inner excitement but I acted calmly. I got out some cigarettes and opened the candy jar. I adjusted the draperies.

"By some silly inadvertence," I explained weakly, "he got hold of my purse and did not want to take it out to camp, so he brought it back."

"I'm glad of that," Gram said quietly. "I really need that thread."

I gulped. I had forgotten the thread. But I said nothing. I wasn't going to cross that spool until I got to it.

When I went to the door to answer his ring I was dignified, but dignity is always pleasantly courteous and so was I. "I'm so sorry for all the bother, Mr. Lindley," I said. "Do come in. I want you to meet my grandmother. Gram, this is Mr. Lindley; my grandmother, Mrs. Dorchester."

The Duchess was all right.

She extended a small hand for him to shake and said, "How do you do, Mr. Lindley? Won't you sit down? It was good of you to return Ellena's bag. She is a nice enough child, being my granddaughter, but she is a sad dropper and loser and forgetter. Perhaps we could talk the Army out of you and appoint you her picker-up-in-chief."

"It would be a pleasure, Mrs. Dorchester, but the talking would be strictly up to you. The Army and I are not on such confidential conversational terms."

"You are from the West?"

"Middle. I am from Iowa. I am going to OCS next week. I had a little basic training at the university but not enough to carry me up to a brass bar."

"What university?"

"Iowa. Iowa State."

Gram frowned thoughtfully. "Iowa State," she mused. "Let me think a minute. . . ." Suddenly she brightened. "Iowa State! Why, of course! Then you must know my old friend, Dean Fanshaw. He's at Iowa State. . . . Ellena, fancy that! Mr. Lindley turns out to be a protégé of one of my best friends. A splendid man, Dean Fanshaw. Salt of the earth! This is delightful, Mr. Lindley. I haven't seen Dean Fanshaw for years. It's a pleasure to know you. You must come and see us often."

Cliff gave me a troubled look. I held my breath.

"Well, to be honest," he said reluctantly, "I knew him fairly well. But since I was only one of ten thousand students——"

"Don't be modest, my dear boy," she interrupted cheerfully. "A friend of the Dean's is a friend of ours. I can imagine the pride and pleasure he is taking in your progress. I shall write him immediately. I shall tell him to have no worries about you from now on, for Ellena and I will be a couple of mothers to you."

Cliff laughed hollowly. "He'll probably have to consult the alumni record to locate me," he began, "for after all——"

"Not Dean Fanshaw!" she said confidently. "He never forgets a protégé. I'm pleased about this. I'm sorry it has become obsolete to say what a small world it is; it expresses my feelings exactly. Ellena, dear, how about a little of the Colonel's sherry? Sen-Sen will be served at the door in case they take note of incoming breaths."

I served the sherry.

"I hope you can be at that ridiculous service dance Saturday night, Mr. Lindley," Gram went on. "I am trying to get a few girls together to help poor dear Mrs. Gilding out and it would be a pleasure to be sure of one familiar and friendly face in that mob of strangers. I shall chaperon my own group, of course."

Cliff glanced at me and smiled broadly. "Fast work, very fast work," he said with apparent pleasure.

"Yes, I always work fast," Gram said complacently. "If I work at all, which isn't any oftener than I can help. . . . What are you doing Sunday, Mr. Lindley? . . . What is your first name by the way?"

"Clifford."

"Cliff for short, I suppose. Well, since Ellena and I are to mother you for Dean Fanshaw's sake, we may as well buckle down to first names immediately. . . . Have you any engagement for Sunday, Cliff?"

He looked appealingly at me. I rose to it immediately. "Oh, Gram," I said, "you are so clever. Couldn't you think of something really different we might do Sunday? Something not everyday, something—oh, something really rare. You have Sunday off, haven't you, Mr. Lindley?"

"Cliff," Gram corrected me shortly. "Now, Cliff, if you can get

the day off—— You know, we've been stuck in this foul hotel ever since we've been here. But about fifty miles away, up in the hills, there is a small but lovely inn . . . a little lake, quiet foot trails, good food. I suppose you can drive a car?"

"Yes, of course."

"We'll make a day of it," she said. "We'll talk the Colonel out of his car and give ourselves a day to remember. But for heaven's sake, don't expect me, at what I am so frequently reminded is my age, to do any hiking or hill climbing with you. I shall sit on the veranda and meditate. I shall commune with nature. It is beautiful country up there—the sun like gold, the sky a thin-spread sapphire and the air wine, pure wine. If you will drive me up and keep Ellena out of mischief for me, I will give you a real party. It will please Dean Fanshaw when I write him how very helpful you've been."

"I doubt if Dean Fanshaw remembers the thousands——"

"Oh, perhaps not the thousands. But he never forgets his favorites. This will warm the cockles of his heart—though, to tell the truth, I've never known what the cockle of a heart is. . . . Well, how about Sunday?"

"It's marvelous, Mrs. Dorchester. It's perfect. It's heavenly. And thank God you won't have time to get an answer back from Iowa before Sunday."

Can you imagine? There it was done, as simply as that. The dance. Sunday.

Cliff gave me an odd look when he left, half triumphant, half despairing, and went down the hall with both hands in the air as if waiving all responsibility for such madness. I gave him a sharp little headshake, meaning to indicate he was to mind his own business and leave everything to Gram.

She was in great good humor. "Isn't he a nice boy, Ellena?" she said pleasantly. "You know, once those Midwesterners learn how to wear their clothes and occupy a chair, they are really quite personable. Character—they've got plenty of character. But the acquisition of social ease makes character a good deal pleasanter to have around the house. Especially men characters. A very nice boy! We must look after him. Your father will be delighted."

I had my doubts about that. But after the slick way she had taken

hold that afternoon, I was satisfied to leave everything to her. And it was well I did.

3

Gram went to work immediately. She called Mrs. Gilding, introduced herself over the telephone and said she had heard it was quite a problem getting enough girls for the Saturday-night dance. She explained that her granddaughter was with her and had several nice young visiting friends in town and if Mrs. Gilding liked, Gram would invite and chaperon them for the evening.

Mrs. Gilding fell on her neck as effectively as she could by telephone and Gram left it to me to round up some girls. I was conscientious about it, too, and sternly repressed the inclination to invite only those less good-looking than I.

She went to work on Dad at dinner. "Dave, you can never guess whom I met this afternoon! Cliff Lindley!"

"Who's Cliff Lindley?"

"You remember my old friend Dean Fanshaw, don't you?"

"Never heard of him. Who's he?"

"Oh, you must have heard of him. You've just forgotten. Well, this Cliff Lindley is one of his pet protégés. He's stationed here and is going up to OCS next week. I could hardly believe my eyes. Dean Fanshaw, a dear man, one in a million, will be very happy. He's the dean of the college Cliff attended."

"That's nice," Dad said pleasantly. "That's very nice. Give you somebody besides me to darn for and damn at. Keep your hands and heart occupied."

"Yes, I'm pleased about it." After a brief pause she said, in a different voice, more appealing and less enthusiastic, "Dave, dear, you've been very nice to us and we're having a grand time but . . . would it be possible for Ellena and me to have the car Sunday? There's a little place up in the hills where Pimpernel and I used to go, a quiet, restful place, and we could have a long, lazy day alone with nature, looking at the scenery and enjoying the mountain air."

Dad looked politely uneasy. "Do you mean all day? Couldn't you take a bus?"

"At my age!" she expostulated mildly. "And buses don't run there. Couldn't you take a bus to camp?"

"Yes, of course I can, Duchess," he said heartily. "I'll be glad to. A day in the country will do you good. Do you want me to take the day off and go with you?"

"Dave, you are the most generous man that ever lived! But of course we wouldn't let you do that. You would be bored to death, sitting under a tree, smelling air all day. What little time you have off, you are entitled to something really worth doing. Maybe if that boy, Dean Fanshaw's protégé, can get the day off, he might drive us up. But Ellena and I can manage if we have to. We'll drive slowly. It will do Ellena good, seeing a little nature and getting some fresh air in her lungs."

"You're absolutely right," Dad said. "Give yourselves a nice day of it. Have the best of everything and don't stint yourselves. Will twenty dollars be enough?"

"More than enough, Dave. It isn't an expensive place. You are the soul of generosity, Dave. You always were. I certainly picked myself a nice son-in-law."

We laughed at that. Mother and Dad had eloped when Mother was in college and Gram had never so much as heard his name before he was suddenly her son-in-law.

There was so much happiness in my eyes when I looked at Gram that they smarted almost like tears. I felt like getting down on my knees and kissing the hem of her skirt. "Duchess" didn't do her justice. Even "Majesty" was too trivial for her talents.

She did not mention the service dance until next evening. Then she inquired anxiously if it would greatly disappoint Dad if we did not attend the officers' dance on Saturday. She told about Mrs. Gilding and the scarcity of girls and said she thought it might be both educational and patriotic for me to do a little personal sacrificing in so good a cause. As for herself, she wanted only to help out in any small ways that were possible.

Dad seemed actually pleased. Pleased and proud. He beamed at me. "That's really sporting of you, Ellena," he said affectionately. "And you are a grand old sport yourself, Ellen. Some of these boys are fine youngsters and the best isn't a bit too good for them. And

they're getting the best when they get my favorite girl friends."

I felt a little ashamed. It wasn't sporting or patriotic on my part. It was selfish and desirable and exciting. But I reminded myself that Dad would probably have a better time at the dance if we weren't there. He couldn't really let himself go with two pairs of eyes on him, daughterly and mother-in-lawly. I can't imagine worse eyes to be upon one who really wants to let himself go.

Gram and I drove around in the car and collected the girls I had lined up. We were a little late arriving at the EMC and the dance was already in full swing. Trust the Duchess to make sure of a nice theatrical entrance. She should have gone on the stage. When she was young, I mean; too late now, of course.

Cliff was on the porch. A lot of other soldiers were there, too, but I saw him and waved my hand. Gram did not see him—or pretended not to. She shooed us decorously inside ahead of her and presented us politely to Mrs. Gilding and the rest of the committee. Cliff and some other soldiers followed us in. We were surrounded by quite a crowd and he could not get to us immediately but my eyes were hypnotized and I saw him at once. He stuck up one finger, meaning first dance, and I nodded.

When he finally elbowed his way through, Gram was perfect.

"Cliff, my dear!" she cried, in a surprise so well simulated it almost fooled me. "How nice that you can be here! Mrs. Gilding, have you met Mr. Lindley? Mr. Lindley is my protégé by inheritance. He was handed down to me by the dean of his college, one of my dearest old friends."

Mrs. Gilding took over and introduced him all round. And then we danced.

"See here, Ellena," he said uneasily, "I seem to be off on the wrong foot somehow. Did I lose my mind and say I was anybody's protégé? I'm not. The Dean wouldn't remember me from Adam. I was up before him a time or two, but so have been a good many thousand others in the last ten years. Did I say I was his protégé?"

"Mr. Lindley," I said firmly, "I do not know what brand of etiquette you are brought up on out there in the Middle West, but back here we are taught never to contradict our elders. Not even if they seem a bit off their noodle, which, take it from me, they never are!"

He laughed but he was still uneasy. "Did I say anything to give her the impression that——"

"You didn't say anything period. Maybe she's psychic. I know she's slick as the dickens. She has already wangled the car out of Dad for tomorrow and broken the news to him that she has some sort of illegitimate appendage at large in the neighborhood."

"No! Not really! What luck! Then she isn't as dumb as she persistently makes me think she must be!"

"She isn't dumb at all," I said. And I added thoughtfully, "This is the first time I've had a chance to study her tactics and now that I see how cleverly she works I'm beginning to doubt if Mother is as tractable as I've always thought. Maybe all the time when I've thought I was working her she was really working me. I'm beginning to lose confidence in all those past generations."

I tried to be patriotic. I danced with others whenever I had to, and didn't mind too much because Cliff always danced along as close as he could and every once in a while when I was gently shuffled his low "Oh, forgive me" was constant assurance that so far he hadn't liked anybody else's looks better.

The men were not permitted to escort us home but when Gram had collected her little flock Cliff and twenty or thirty others followed us out to the car. I started the motor. Gram leaned over me and called out the window.

"And Cliff Lindley, kindly do not forget that you promised to do a few odd jobs for me tomorrow. I shall be expecting you at 10:00 A. M. And sharp."

"With pick and shovel, Mrs. Dorchester," he said solemnly.

The men looked quite impressed and two or three volunteered their services also but Gram said, "No, thanks, one handy man is all I can handle."

I was so happy I was ashamed of myself. Because after all there was a war, and perfectly frightful things were going on all over the world; but I was so happy I felt almost sick. I was intoxicated with it.

When we got home I tried to tell Gram how I felt. I wanted to be honest and aboveboard and warn her that this was no passing flirtation like those other times. She listened gravely.

"Ellena," she said kindly, "you needn't have any qualms about hap-

piness. When eventually you attain to my ripe and doddering senility, you will look back and regret many things. Little things, big things, accidental things, intentional, careless, inadvertent—you will feel regret for much. But I feel no regret for any moment of happiness during my whole life. Save your regrets for regrettable things; there will be plenty of them. But there is nothing regrettable about happiness."

I went to bed feeling very tender toward the Duchess.

Sunday was perfect. Cliff appeared at the exact stroke of ten, with flowers and candy. "The GI equivalent of pick and shovel, Mrs. Dorchester," he said.

Gram cooed over him. I was too full of youth and pride to break down and coo but I looked deep into his eyes. They were the same as before.

We went down and the car was waiting. Gram said she would drive until we got out of town as she knew the way. Cliff and I got in the back seat. We did not say anything. Words seemed utterly useless. I remember wondering why people in the process of evolution ever bothered to learn to talk when one could say everything just by looking.

When we were out of town Gram pulled off to the side of the road and stopped the motor. "If you wreck the car, Cliff," she said, "you can make your adjustments with the Administration and the War Department and Colonel Courtney. Can you read a road map or do soldiers in this war drive by beams and instinct?"

"I can read maps . . . some maps," he added hastily, for he still thought she was a little goofy.

"Well, here's the map. I've marked all the tricky turns. Ellena, you come over here and read the map for him."

Cliff opened both doors and Gram and I got out. She stepped royally into the back seat and I slid into the front. Cliff got in behind the wheel.

"If you get us lost I don't care a tinker's damn though I do not know what a tinker's damn is nor why it is any better than ordinary damns," she said cheerfully. "Only don't bother me. Chaperoning those young hyenas last night brought on my asthma and I didn't sleep a wink. I expect to sleep from here until we get wherever we are going to get. You keep your eyes on the map, Ellena."

"Cliff," I said, "Gram is nice but she is an awful liar. She never had asthma in her life. She slept like a log last night. And she never sleeps in an automobile. So don't say anything unpleasant about her for she won't miss a syllable."

"Can you think of any unpleasant syllables that are synonymous with angel from heaven and gift of the gods?" Cliff wanted to know.

"An amusing hellcat," I suggested.

Cliff started the motor and we were on our way to heaven. Cliff had his eyes on the road, mine were glued to the map. Gram's were studiously closed.

We were happy. We were all happy—Gram included. But for the first time I felt a little self-conscious. Cliff did too. We could not think of anything to talk about. Finally I turned around and looked at Gram.

"Gram," I said, "for anybody who talked my father out of his car on the pretext of wanting to look at scenery, I must say you have an odd way of utilizing the opportunity."

Gram opened her eyes. "I see things with my mind's eye. That's a quotation from somebody, I think, but I admit it doesn't make much sense."

We laughed and after that we talked, all three of us. Gram kept her eyes open. I forgot to watch the map but she knew the road.

"Ellena, thank God our Army and Navy are not depending on you to get them anywhere. You'd lead off for Iceland and land up in the Philippines. Back up, Cliff. We were supposed to turn left there."

But we were in no hurry. We talked a great deal. About Iowa and where Cliff and I went to school. Cliff had a brother and one sister. The sister was married and had two little sons; her husband was in the service. His brother was still in school. Gram was a perfect lady. She did not mention dear, darling Dean Fanshaw, who was such an embarrassing subject for poor Cliff. The road went up and up, winding; hills, many hills, nice wooded hills. Everything was nice. There were few cars on the road, which was not a well-traveled thoroughfare.

Where we were going, when we reached it, was just right. It was not a hotel, not a town hotel. It was more a kind of stopping-place—a big, low, rambling house that seemed to wander way back into

chicken coops and cowsheds and heaven knows what else. Three or four cars were parked alongside and a few people were sitting on the rickety old veranda. No uniforms except Cliff's. No shoulder metal to make him feel uncomfortable because Dad was a colonel and he a mere private first class I noticed, but still private. I thanked God he had never heard about His Excellency with his alligator brief cases and imported walking sticks and gay insouciance . . . and his divorce and lurking stenographers.

Gram indicated various paths where certain things were to be seen but was vague about details.

"There's a rock up there, I think. Somebody fell off it and got hurt, or else it rolled downhill onto somebody and hurt him. There's a famous tree down there; somebody died under it, or got murdered. Maybe he got lynched on it. There's a very stiff climb up that way. Everybody is supposed to climb it. I never did. You see something when you get to the top—I've forgotten just what. It's several miles or several counties—maybe several states. Anyhow, it's quite remarkable."

We went in and had dinner. Gram was right about the place. It was a delicious dinner. Southern chicken smothered in a lot of herbs, hot biscuits and no end of vegetables. All good. But I wasn't really hungry.

When we finished Gram said, "Now be good children and run along and look at all these historic spots and try to improve your minds. And don't bother me. I am going to mummify myself with the other veranda mummies and if you come back and find me asleep, please walk on tiptoe and refrain from sneezing. You can certainly show enough respect for your elders—your moderate elders, in this case—to let them finish their nap."

It was a momentous afternoon. I do not remember the rock. I do not remember the tree. And, like Gram, I do not remember whether one saw counties or states from the hilltop, though it was all plainly written on a big sign. But it was a tremendous afternoon. Cliff and I got engaged.

"Ellena," he said, "I love you so much—I give you my word, I even love your grandmother. Though I think she is a little crazy."

"Cliff, I love you, too. I will try to love Iowa and all your rela-

tives although I am willing to bet they are all a lot crazier than my Gram."

We said a few silly things like that. Not many. It takes only a minute to admit you are in love and get engaged. It's the repetition and the confirmation that takes so long.

The hours raced away.

"Do you think she really is having a peaceful nap?" Cliff asked.

"Not Gram! She's probably taken the car and gone back to town and left us to hitchhike home. She would consider it a good workout for our devotion."

So we went back. She was not asleep but she had not gone off without us. She had drummed up three other antediluvians and they were playing bridge. She frowned when she saw us.

"Please do not interrupt this hand," she said. "It's doubled and redoubled. . . . There used to be a kind of a library here somewhere. Go and pick yourselves out some good books. A little education won't hurt you."

So we went off again.

Eventually we went back and the bridge game broke up. Gram had won ninety cents and was well pleased with herself.

We had a quiet supper—Sunday-night tea it was, really.

"Mrs. Dorchester," Cliff said suddenly, "you have been so wonderful to me that it seems only fair to tell you that Ellena and I love each other. We are engaged."

Out of a clear sky! Just like that!

"The Middle West," I thought, when the room quit rocking under my feet, "is rocker-ribbed than all New England put together."

Gram took a dainty sip of tea. "Fancy that!" she said mildly. "Cliff, believe it or not, I have been in love myself a time or two. I've been engaged. In fact, I went so far once as to get married."

Cliff laughed. "Well, I should hope so!" he said.

Gram frowned. "You mean to say you wouldn't love her if she was illegitimate?"

Cliff looked startled for a bare instant. Then he laughed again. "There's no if about that," he said. "I love her."

"That's better," she said approvingly. "However, to the best of my knowledge and belief, she is quite legitimate."

When we went out to the car she said, "I shall drive home. I wouldn't think of entrusting the Colonel's car to love-locked hands."

"How about your asthma?" Cliff asked slyly.

"I do not drive with my bronchial tubes. Did you bring your screw driver?"

Cliff was really stumped. I was too. I was glad she wasn't talking to me.

"My . . . screw driver?" he repeated vaguely.

"Yes, for the odd jobs. The pick and shovel. What, no screw driver!"

"I'm afraid I haven't one with me. Maybe there is one in the car somewhere. I'll have a look. Would a knife do? What do you want a screw driver for?"

"To take off the rear-view mirror, of course," she said impatiently. "How can I keep my eyes on the road and watch what's going on in the back seat at the same time?"

"But won't you need the reflector——"

"Certainly not. I am no woman driver. I can tell when there's something behind me without waiting for it to come up and smack me in the bumpers. . . . Well, tip it up, then. But if I get curious, I warn you, I shall turn it down."

Cliff and I got into the back seat. Gram drove as she did everything else, steadily, smoothly, efficiently. It was quiet, warm and dark. Cliff had his arms around me and our faces were together.

"Mrs. Dorchester," Cliff said at last, huskily, "don't you think it is going to be a little hard explaining all this to . . . the Colonel?"

"Why explain? What business is it of his, anyhow? And we are only going to be here ten days longer."

"Yes, I know. But I haven't even ten days. I'm leaving for Virginia on Tuesday."

She drove quite a distance before speaking. "I shall speak to the Dean about that. This modern education! Turning out men of such gross immaturity as to get themselves engaged without a look at the calendar to make sure they have time for proper formalities! It's the communistic influence, that's what it is!"

We didn't say anything. Our lips were together and we were both smiling.

"Did you say Tuesday?" she demanded so abruptly that we jumped violently.

"Yes, day after tomorrow. It is the War Department's whim, not mine."

"We haven't time to call Emily Post and get a ruling on it, but speaking extemporaneously I'm inclined to think you've almost got to meet the Colonel. Shouldn't you think so, Ellena?"

"I would think so," I said, my lips half smothered against his.

"I don't suppose they would dream of letting you off at a decent hour so you could come for dinner tomorrow night?" she said indignantly.

"Yes, I can get off," he said. "We're just marking time until Tuesday. But are you sure the Colonel——"

I smiled to myself in the darkness. Perhaps it was partly out of sympathy because His Excellency had played it so low-down on her, but Gram could certainly handle the Colonel.

"You come for dinner," she said. "Let us know the hour. It probably will not be very pleasant, but what is?"

Everything was pleasant for me. I was there in the back seat, in his arms, his lips moving from my hair to my cheek to my lips—oh, very passionately pleasant! I did not feel troubled about his going to Virginia to OCS. No school could be so far away that I could not see him once in a while. And perhaps by the time he had finished training, the war would be over and we could be together forever and ever. His lips came down to mine, then, and I stopped thinking.

Gram slammed down on the brakes and the car came to a stop. I sat up quickly. We were at the edge of town.

"You'd better drive us in, Cliff," Gram said. "It will be the least odd of all the jobs you've done today."

He kissed me and went over to the driver's seat.

4

Dad was not there when we went up. Gram ordered me to bed quite curtly, so I went to my room and she to hers. When I was ready for bed I went into her room. She was sitting in her dressing gown in the chaise longue, looking calm and peaceful.

"Gram," I said, "you've been perfectly wonderful. I want to tell you—I want you to know—I really love him. It's not like those other times, those other boys. I knew it right away. Don't you remember? He was the fifteenth to the left of the second lieutenant and I really love him. I never felt like this before."

"Yes, I know. Sit down, Ellena. . . . And he had the nerve to call me a fast worker! Or was he speaking of you? . . . I know, Ellena. The speed is geared pretty high for me, at my age. But I want you to be happy. I want you to have all the real happiness you can, as much as you can. You are going to have sorrow and worries and heartbreaks—who hasn't?—but happiness you must have, too, to help you stand the heartbreaks." She broke off abruptly. "I should write a book! . . . What I want to say, Ellena, is that although this is all very fast and exciting and thrilling, keep it good. Keep it clean and gay and good. Then whatever comes of it later on, all your memories of it will be that way."

"And in the meantime, what are we going to do about Dad?"

"That's the first bridge. We'll both be in bed and sound asleep when he comes in. We'll stay in bed and sound asleep. I'll put it up to him at breakfast nonchalantly. You stay in bed. If he comes in tonight wanting attentions and refreshments, snore him down to the last echo. We need a few hours to digest the . . . what does Shakespeare say? . . . we've got to digest the sweetness of our French pastry though it do——"

"Gram, that isn't Shakespeare!"

"No. It's nobody. It's just living, that's all. Good night, Ellena. Digest the sweetness of your dreams tonight and leave the colonel to me."

5

I was thrilled all night. I was in ecstasy. I had a qualm or two when I thought of Mother up there alone in complete ignorance of all these momentous things. But I had done my best to warn her. And after all it was her own fault. Dad had invited her and she had deliberately chosen not to come.

I had a qualm about Dad, too; how he would take it. But I didn't

really care. I wanted them to like it! I desperately wanted them to like it. But if they didn't, it was not going to make any difference. If I had to elope as they had done, I would.

So most of the night was just ecstasy, thinking about him, feeling the touch of his hand, the touch of his lips; hearing his voice, exulting in his pleased smile and the excited warmth in his eyes. I was awed, too, awed and a little frightened, almost terrified. It was terrifying to think how casually, how haphazardly, it had come about. Suppose we had not gone to the speechmaking—and we might easily have declined for neither Gram nor I cared much for speeches. Suppose Dad had not been transferred down from Boston. Suppose he had neglected to invite us to visit him, or Gram had been disinclined for the South and refused to go with me. Suppose—suppose His Excellency had been at home, in which case Gram would have remained with him. Just suppose she had not wanted the fuchsia-colored thread. If any one of these suppositions had been reality we would never have met.

It was frightening to think that anything so tremendous hung on so many minor threads.

I felt a little more kindly toward His Excellency—not approving, not at all approving, but more kindly. I hoped that if at some far distant time Cliff should get tired of living with me he would have the courage to remove himself, just as Grandfather had. And I would take it with Gram's kind of chin-up courage. But, I resolved, I will move heaven and earth to keep him from getting tired of living with me.

I do not remember that I slept at all that night. I hope I didn't. I would not willingly have missed a second of it, a second of the rapture, or the awe, or the noble resolve.

I heard Gram get up, earlier than usual, and listening attentively I surmised that she was taking extraordinary pains with her appearance. I smiled at that. It was part of her philosophy that a woman's appearance figured inestimably in her results. She went to the kitchenette softly.

I slid out of bed to open my door a crack and slid back. For the first time the smallness of the apartment and the way the rooms were practically piled on top of one another had its advantages.

Dad and Gram could have no secrets from me if they talked in normal tones, and I knew I could count on Gram to see that they did. I did just as she told me—stayed in bed and looked asleep. Dad's alarm went off. He got up with military immediacy and headed for the bathroom. There was the odor of coffee and bacon and toasting bread.

When the bathroom door opened again I heard Gram say, "Oh, good morning, Dave. Sit down. Melon and coffee on, bacon and eggs coming up."

Dad scuffled his chair, sitting down. Scuffled his paper. I smiled again. Usually he had to fetch it from the hall himself. She was leaving no pacific stone unturned.

When he had finished his melon she went in with the breakfast tray and sat down opposite him. I could hear her large sigh.

"Have a nice time yesterday?" Dad asked pleasantly.

"Um, yes," she answered absently. "Yes. Pleasant enough."

"Ellena still asleep?"

"Apparently. Don't let your breakfast get cold, Dave. You need a well-stoked furnace for a big job like yours. And they have changed all those silly ideas about empty trucks going farther and faster than full ones. Now they say the well-stoked furnace burns longest. I don't know why they insist on making the human organism either an empty truck or a stoked furnace. But anyhow they have come to their senses and say it takes a good breakfast to last through a tough day."

I knew Gram like a book. She was stalling for time. I do not know from personal experience whether the stomach route is the short cut to a man's heart, but I know that Dad, like everybody else, is in a much better frame of mind with a full tummy. I hugged myself gleefully. She was doing all right.

"Dave," she said plaintively, after a few minutes of quiet crunching, "I hope you're on top of the world this morning. I am not. I am very low. I have to tell you something you will not like and ask your advice about something you know absolutely nothing about."

"What's the matter, Duchess? Something backfired on you?"

"Yes. That's it, that's it exactly, Dave. Something backfired. Backfired unpardonably."

"You didn't wreck my car, did you?" he asked with sudden anxiety.

"No, not your car, Dave. Just your life, that's all."

"Anything wrong with Eileen?" he asked quickly.

"No, not Eileen. Ellena."

"Is she sick?"

"Worse than that. She is in love. Can you imagine anything so preposterous? That boy, that creature, that unknown interloper from nowhere, whom I took under my wing out of sheer affection for dear old Dean Fanshaw—oh, the injustice of it! He had the effrontery to propose to Ellena and she accepted him."

Dad laughed. "Duchess, Duchess," he said reprovingly, "you are losing your grip; you are showing your age. Ellena's falling in love is nothing to be upset about. She has been getting herself proposed to and accepting immediately ever since she stepped out of diapers. You know how children are!"

"Oh, do you think so, Dave? Well, that's a relief! He is a nice enough boy and all that but I feel so responsible. Especially with Eileen not here! Anyhow, we only have to put up with it for twenty-four hours. He's going to OCS tomorrow. I was polite, Dave. I was a lady and a grandmother. I asked him to come for dinner tonight to meet you——"

"I can't be here for dinner tonight. I have an engagement."

"So has your daughter," she inserted quickly. "Dave, I can't bear the brunt of this alone. He will be gone tomorrow and you can wash your hands of him but he will be here for dinner tonight and they think they are in love and if you can't be here I shall take the first plane for Washington. I refuse to be saddled with such responsibility."

"You saddled yourself with the young jackanapes in the first place, didn't you?" Dad demanded indignantly. "And then wished him off on Ellena to get rid of him. I fail to see why I should be involved."

"Very well, Dave, if that is your attitude," she said wearily. "Will

you make my reservation on—no, I will do it myself. If you take no responsibility for the future of your only daughter I could not trust you to make a telephone call for me.”

“All right, all right, Ellen,” he said soothingly. “I’ll come for dinner. Who is the silly ass, anyhow?”

“I resent that, Dave. He is not a silly ass, by any means. He is a college graduate and an engineer and is going to OCS. And if a man like Dean Fanshaw approves of him there is small reason for us to go high-hat and name-calling. And he will be gone tomorrow. It certainly will not hurt you to pretend to be fatherly for an hour or two.”

“Who is he, anyhow? What’s his name? Where’s he from?”

“I told you all that but as usual you paid no attention to the name of anything that wasn’t blonde. His name is Cliff Lindley. He comes from some place in Iowa. Not dashing, maybe, not showily sophisticated, but solid, thoroughly solid. The depths of respectability. The state I am speaking of, not Cliff. I do not know whether he is respectable or not.”

“All right, I’ll be here for dinner. What outfit is he with?”

“I don’t know. But he is an engineer and is going to OCS tomorrow.”

I resented the general trend of the conversation. I got up immediately, dragged my bathrobe angrily about me and marched into the little dining room.

“Dad,” I said firmly, “don’t you go off with any idea that this is another of those childish crushes like—like the others. This is real. This is deadly real. I love him with my whole heart. I want you and Mother to like him and be glad about it all, but it isn’t going to make a particle of difference whether you are or not. I am going to marry him the minute he asks me to set the date. This is a real engagement. It isn’t kid stuff.”

“All right, all right, Ellena,” he said, in a pacifying voice. “Keep your bathrobe on.” He gave Gram a nasty look over my shoulder. “I should have known better than to give you a free rein with her. It’s her mother’s fault, up there blowing her nose in peace and quiet while you drag her daughter to the dogs.”

“It is not Gram’s fault, Dad,” I said emphatically. “She had

nothing to do with it. I did it myself. Cliff and I did it together. I looked at him and loved him. Don't you remember the day of the speeches and I wanted to know who was fifteenth to the left of the lieutenant? It was Cliff. I loved him a little then, I think. I know I love him now with my whole heart."

"Now don't get upset, Ellena," he said. "Falling in love is nothing to get upset about. I will be here for dinner. We'll let the Duchess break it to your mother. Better not mention it at such distance. Might aggravate her hay fever."

"I do not want either of you to mention it to her. I want to tell her myself. I wouldn't dream of letting anybody else tell my mother the most important news of my whole life. Besides, I have already told her I met him and love him. But she doesn't know we are engaged because we weren't when I wrote."

"Well, she won't be surprised at your falling in love. She is used to that," he said, with maddening calm.

"She is not used to this kind of falling in love because it never happened before," I said. "And if you are going to be stuffy and pull rank on your future son-in-law, and at your own table, I prefer you should not come to dinner. I am quite capable of arranging my marriage without your assistance unless you are going to be genuinely sweet and like yourself."

"I'm going to be sweet," he assured me. "Of course I am going to be sweet. Why not? Go as far as you like. Order the best you can get for dinner; have flowers; have wine. Do it up in style."

"I thought we would have it up here instead of in the public dining room," Gram said. "It is more intimate and domestic. More *en famille*."

"And also, so Cliff will not feel self-conscious in the presence of silver leaves in public," I added.

Dad tossed three ten-dollar bills on the table.

"Do it up brown, Duchess," he said. "Honor of the East at stake. Got to show the Middle West how we handle high-class betrothals back here. Get yourself a new dress, Ellena. An engagement rates a new dress, I should think."

"I don't want a new dress," I said, grabbing the money. "I'll buy another bond to rush the war along as fast as possible so my husband

and I can settle down to the business of living a decent, peaceful family life."

"Sure, sure, that's the idea!" He kissed me affectionately. But his eyes on Gram were cold. "Eileen really is your daughter, isn't she?" he asked.

"To the best of my knowledge and belief, she is," Gram said serenely. "But she has been subjected to your influence for twenty years, so I no longer know just what to expect of her in an emergency. When she was in my hands I handled her very well. I hope you can say the same."

To my amazement, Dad flushed a little. He said good-by rather hurriedly and went out.

II. THE COLONEL

1

I DON'T know when I've had such a jolt. And that was odd, for Ellena had been falling in love all her life. I had been introduced to a long succession of beaux and immediately forgotten all about it. Nothing ever came of it.

But this time it seemed to knock the world out from under me. Maybe it was the war. Children take themselves and their emotions more seriously in wartime. All this talk about sons and husbands overseas, fighting and dying for the little women at home, is bound to get under their skin to some extent . . . some worse than others. It even got slightly under mine.

The fact that Eileen, her mother, was not there to apply a gentle checkrein added to the gravity of the situation. Added gravity, I suppose, because it put it strictly up to me. Being in the army myself certainly did not make me responsible for every member of the enlisted personnel, but women have an unaccountable way of reaching their conclusions.

I didn't like Gram's having a finger in it, either. I like Gram. Through twenty years she and I had hit it off together perfectly. But I wouldn't trust her any farther than you could throw a stick. Nothing vicious about her, nothing mean. But slick! Slick as the devil.

She had always made a great to-do over His Excellency's domineering management of her and of their household. It is true he had strong wishes and tastes and was not shy about announcing them. But Eileen and I had often noticed that she could get around him in anything she really wanted. Up until the divorce, that is. And after all, we had only her word for it that it was he who wanted the divorce. To me, wanting a divorce sounded a good deal more like the Duchess than His Excellency.

It was odd, too, that I had never so much as heard the name of any such dear old friend as this Dean appeared to be. And I remembered Ellena asking about the fifteenth GI from the lieutenant the day of the parade. It was a damned queer coincidence that the one Ellena had taken a shine to should turn out to be a protégé of Ellen's precious pal.

Skulduggery somewhere. I was sure of it.

And the old lady admitted she didn't know a thing about the man. His name. He came from Iowa. A "respectable state," she called it. But she wasn't above attaching him to a respectable state if she took the fancy.

Still, I was more irritated with Eileen than with the Duchess. Oddly enough, I did not feel at all annoyed with Ellena. She was a child. War and uniforms and tender looks do things to a girl. The Duchess had certainly thrown a monkey wrench into what had been a pleasant visit, but chiefly I blamed Eileen. Perhaps because I was already holding some blame against her. But I argued that a mother's place is beside her young daughter during wartime. I had invited her and she, of her own accord, elected to remain at home and coddle her hay fever.

I had planned the whole unfortunate mess to give Ellena a treat and cheer the Duchess up a little. Not, I must say, that she seemed much distressed. Still, as I figured it, a woman can't help feeling distressed over a divorce at her age. Unless it was she who wanted it in the first place.

"The hell with the boy-scout stuff from this on!" I thought angrily. "It's the last good deed anybody'll ever get out of me."

All this cogitation was while I was driving out to base. The first thing I did on arrival was to ask my orderly to get me a list of those going up to OCS next day. He was there all right, Pfc. Clifford R. Lindley. I was a little surprised. I wasn't sure but the Duchess had made it up by way of adding to the respectability of his status. He was in Company B. I told my orderly to go to Company B and get his record but immediately thought better of it. His captain would naturally think it had some military bearing and it might leak out among the boys, as all military secrets do. So I ordered the jeep and went over myself. Captain Fergusson was in

command of Company B and immediately dismissed the men in his office when I indicated my visit was of confidential nature.

"It's purely personal, Captain," I explained. "Could I see the records and rating of Private First Class Lindley? He is in your company, I understand."

"Yes, sir. He's going up to OCS tomorrow."

He got out his files and began searching through them.

"Do you know anything about him?" I asked.

"Nothing special. He's got a good record or he wouldn't be going up tomorrow. We're sorry to lose him out of the outfit but they told me to fine-tooth-comb the ranks for good material and we consider him good material. Here are his papers."

I looked them over. Yes, Iowa. Twenty-three years old. Electrical engineer. Unmarried. No dependents. The record was all right.

"Bliss is his sergeant and knows him pretty well. Would you like to speak to him?"

"Yes, I would. But confidentially, you understand."

He sent for the sergeant. A fine, strapping sergeant he was, too. I remembered Hortense's opinion, "nothing could superintend a high-class sa'geant."

The Captain presented him and said I wanted information.

"Sit down, Sergeant," I said. "It's personal information I want and has no military bearing. I believe Private First Class Lindley is one of your men. I suppose you know him fairly well."

He looked mildly surprised. "Yes, sir, I know him. He's leaving us tomorrow. OCS."

"Sergeant," I said, "I trust you will treat my inquiry as strictly confidential. My interest has nothing to do with his military career. It is purely personal. To tell you the truth," I said, assuming an appearance of utter candor, "I am making the inquiry for my mother-in-law. She is visiting me and it seems when this boy was in college he was a favorite of the Dean who is a bosom friend of hers. She has made him her protégé by transference and has asked him to spend his leaves with her in Washington. Women are sentimental about these things in wartime and I feel I should do some investigating on her behalf."

"Naturally, sir." The two men saw the reasonableness of that at once.

"He hasn't left yet, sir. I think he's around. Would you like to meet him?" the sergeant suggested helpfully.

"No, I think not," I said. "And I do not want him to know I was inquiring about him. I believe I am to have the honor of meeting him tonight. I dare say he's a corking fine chap and all that but I feel I owe it to my wife to see that her mother is not imposed on in her generous and impulsive intentions."

"I don't think he'd impose on anybody, sir," the sergeant said. "He's all right. He seems regular. Does his work all right. Gets along with the men okay. Gets along with me, too, and I ain't easy."

"The usual bad habits, I suppose?" I remarked tolerantly.

"I suppose so, sir. Seems to do about what they all do. Drinks a little, shoots craps a little, dances pretty good. He's a good talker. I thought first he was maybe one of those authors, he slings his words around so free and easy. But no, he's an engineer. Studied it anyhow. Came into service from college. He's what I'd call a good mean average."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Well, the way he takes the war. Some hate it and beef their hearts out about it. Some are all hot and high principles and go around shooting their heads off about patriotism. Nuisances, both sets. This guy takes it normal. He's not a hell-raiser and he's not a flag-waver. Just takes it as it comes. It's war and he's in it and sometime maybe we'll get it over. A good general average, I'd say, and they're the easiest to get things done with."

"Does the usual amount of young-man wolfing, I suppose," I suggested, cleverly I thought.

"Well, sir, the guys think not. We figure he's maybe all tied up with a girl back home. He dances and has dates but nothing steady. And he's always ribbing the lines that wait turns for the phone. Every night he loaf around and strolls down the line, kidding them. I have had to make a good many calls myself—" he coughed deprecatingly—"so I seen this for myself and plenty times. A couple, three nights ago, though, he was in line with the rest of us. And he got

ribbed plenty. He was two back of me so I heard it all. He took it cool enough. Kept grinning and singing 'Hello, Central, give me heaven.' He can take it as well as dish it out. Long-distance call he was making, I guess, telling about he made the grade for OCS."

"Thanks very much, Sergeant," I said. "You have been very helpful and I feel much relieved. I gather that he is a normal, high-spirited, healthy young soldier. I wouldn't ask for more than that."

"I couldn't say a thing against him, sir. Now mind, I ain't saying he's perfect. Who is? I've laid him out times like I lay 'em all out. For the good of the service, I mean, sir. But nothing serious. The most I hold against him is that loose way he slings his words about."

"What do you mean by that?"

"The glib way he talks. He talks quite a lot. But he never lets a word do business for itself. He tacks on everything he can think of so it takes time to get what he's driving at. Kind of kidding, I guess, but it ain't military."

"Thanks very much, Sergeant. Confidential, you understand."

"Yes, sir, I understand."

He went out and I thanked Captain Fergusson.

"Bliss is right about stringing out the words," he said, smiling. "He's a hell of a talker. A lot of newspapermen come nosing around camp to get local color and pick up anecdotes and we always sick them onto Lindley. They like him. Not that I consider it an A-1 compliment to be liked by newspapermen. But they always ask for him by name when they come back for more."

At first I thought I felt better but I soon realized that I didn't; I felt worse. He sounded just the type a girl, a nice girl like Ellena, emotionally softened by the war, could fall for and fall hard. But there was nothing I could do about it.

2

I was a little late getting home for dinner. When I went in, even in my bemused condition, I realized that it was a pretty picture. Soft lights, long graceful flower sprays; the Duchess sitting primly in a chair too big for her, making her look regal; Ellena and the young soldier on the couch, looking at each other.

The youngsters snapped to their feet and the Duchess waved her hand at me affectedly.

"Oh, Dad," Ellena cried breathlessly, "I want you to meet Cliff, Private First Class Lindley. My father, Cliff, Colonel Courtney."

He gave the correct military acknowledgment. I held out my hand and we shook heartily. I kissed Ellena and saluted the Duchess. The boy looked all right, well groomed, pleasant, personable. But almost any healthy young male American looks well groomed, pleasant and personable in his uniform.

"Cocktails will be up immediately, Dave," the Duchess said.

She was not gushing over the boy, I'll say that for her. But she was certainly putting on airs.

"Since I hear from the Underground that you have insinuated yourself rather neatly into the heart of our quiet household, do you mind if I dispense with the Pfc. and call you Cliff, as my ladies do?" I asked.

"It's very kind of you, sir."

I made some small talk about his home town and his college and brought up the Duchess's darling Dean. He was noncommittal on that point but answered everything else with great frankness. But all normal young Americans are frank, almost to the point of a vice, so I didn't give him extra rating for that.

When the cocktails were served the Duchess rose primly and said if we would excuse her she had a few matters to attend to. He and I stood while she walked out.

"Ellena," I suggested, with what I considered some diplomacy, "couldn't you help your grandmother a little? She is tired, I think, and at her age——"

Ellena stood up at once and looked me straight in the face. "Yes, I'll go, Dad. But please remember what I told you this morning, for I meant every word of it. I still mean it."

"Of course, my dear, of course," I said soothingly.

I closed the door after her and pulled a chair up closer to the couch. We lighted cigarettes.

"You are taking it nobly, Colonel," Cliff began, rather nervously. "I know it must have been a shock to you. It was a shock to me, too."

"Oh, not much of a shock to me," I said tolerantly. "I've known

Ellena longer than you have. In some ways she takes after her grandmother. It's hard for either of them to shock me."

"Sir," he said quickly, "I . . . I want to tell you . . . I really don't know how she . . . her grandmother, that is . . . got the idea that I was any favorite of the Dean's. I give you my word I didn't say so. She just seemed to leap to the conclusion and I couldn't talk her out of it. I am just one of no end of thousands of students who have gone through under him, that's all. I asked Ellena if she thought maybe she was a little crazy—delightfully so, of course—but——"

"Crazy like a fox!" I said dryly. "But don't let it bother you. I am onto her little ways."

"If you would like references or anything," he went on in some embarrassment, "I can give you names of people who know me and my family——"

"Not necessary," I said airily. "I am not hiring you. We may as well face this thing reasonably. We are in for a long, hard war. You and Ellena are young. Your affections may change; they may not. At least you will have plenty of time to find out."

"I . . . suppose . . . so, sir."

"The immediate facts are that you and Ellena have met and think you are in love."

"We are in love, sir. We are sure of that."

"All right, grant it." I thought I was doing very well. "You are in love. You are engaged. It's all right with me. You see, Ellena has been in love before. She has been engaged before. But nothing came of it. Nothing happened. It was not serious."

"This is serious, sir. This is different. It is the most serious thing in our lives. I have thought I was in love, too; I was engaged once. But it was never anything like this. We are really in love. And we are not just lightly and passingly engaged. We are going to be married. We are going to live together."

"That may very well be; parents never know for sure. Only time will tell. In the meantime you are in love and want to be married. We accept it on that basis and start from there. Tomorrow you go up for training. Ellena and her grandmother will be returning home soon. Write your love letters. Enjoy your thrills. We have time enough to see what happens."

"But don't think it isn't serious, sir," he said huskily. "If that is what you have in mind, if that is why you are so surprisingly agreeable about it, you are just deluding yourself. This is serious."

"I agree with you. Right now it is the most serious thing in all our lives. And it may go right on being as serious as that. Being only a father and not a prophet, I cannot say. But," I added smiling, "I'm glad they relieved me of the chore of notifying Eileen."

He looked puzzled. "Eileen?"

"Eileen is my wife, her mother," I explained.

"Ellen, Eileen and Ellena," he mused slowly.

"It's another of Gram's little affectations," I explained. "She came from a long line of girls called Ellen—the husbands seem to have counted for little. I don't recall whether Adam had a girl child named Ellen, but if he did, the Duchess descends from her in a straight line. But she says it began to bore her—or perhaps she wanted the distinction of the sign-off, so she worked variations on it. Hence the Ellen, Eileen and Ellena."

He laughed. "I suppose if Ellena had been a boy she would have disinherited him. Or at least discredited him with something like Elanahan or Elenezer."

You couldn't help liking the boy. I thanked God he had made the grade for OCS. If he had been staying on there at camp I should have had to wire Eileen to recall her daughter immediately.

Distance. And time. I had faith in them. I had faith in Eileen, too, though I was blaming her for some things. I was glad I was not the one to break this news to her.

Ellena came to say that dinner was served and we went out. The Duchess had done a neat job. The dining room was not much more than a dinette but it was set up with flowers and wineglasses and although the food had been prepared in the hotel kitchens, she had planned with adroit efficiency so that everything was on hand for us to serve ourselves without waiters bobbing around us and in and out.

When I went to my place at the head of the small table, the Duchess motioned Ellena to the chair opposite me and she took the one at my right. She smiled across the table at Cliff.

"When you visit me in Washington," she said graciously, "you

will find me in the place of honor at the head of my table. But here, in her mother's absence, Ellena is her father's hostess. I am merely the chaperon, a completely useless appendage in this era."

Very slick. A delicate but unmistakable way of indicating that Ellena was no common pickup.

Ellena looked pretty and important opposite me. Evidently she had seen in Cliff's eyes that I had not been too much the ogre, for the dignity of anxiety left her and she became gay and charming. We had a nice meal.

When dinner was over and after we had had coffee and liqueur in the living room, the Duchess said, "Ellena and Cliff, since this will be your last night together for some time, would you like to run off to a movie or a dance and be alone together for a while?"

"We should like to be alone together for a while," Ellena said.

"Very much," Cliff corroborated promptly.

"I suppose you can drive a car, Cliff?" I said. "Mine's down in the garage. Would you like to take it and go for a run out to some quiet place in the country and enjoy a look at the scenery?"

We laughed at that, remembering how the Duchess had pulled the scenery to talk me out of the car the day before. Cliff and Ellena looked at each other and obviously that was what they wanted—to drive off alone to some quiet place. I handed over the keys. I shook hands with Cliff and wished him all the luck in the world. He thanked me gratefully and said he would really dig in at school so next time he came to see me he wouldn't feel self-conscious if he didn't use the service entrance.

The Duchess gave him her hand daintily. "And we shall see you for luncheon tomorrow, Cliff? Won't the dear Dean be surprised to learn that you are engaged to my granddaughter!"

"Not if he has seen your granddaughter—except to be surprised that she accepted me," Cliff said. He kissed her hand. This clearly surprised her, not expecting such gallantry from a respectable state like Iowa.

"He will not be surprised if he knows you as well as I do, Duchess," I put in grimly.

Ellena kissed me and whispered a grateful, "Thank you, sweetie!"

When they had gone, Ellen said, "Thanks very much, Dave."

You did a beautiful job and I was proud of you. I think I shall go to bed now and read something to quiet my nerves. It has all been rather exciting."

"Just a minute, Duchess," I said. "Would you mind telling me where and when you got so thick with this Fanshaw?"

"Dean Fanshaw? Oh, I never met him myself," she said innocently. "You remember my friend Janet Shoreham, don't you?"

"Yes, of course I remember Janet. What's she got to do with it?"

"Why, her niece Marian married his son a couple of years ago. Janet went to the wedding and wrote me all about it. He must be a wonderful man or Janet would never have permitted her niece to marry his son."

"Just as I thought," I said grimly.

"Good night, David. And again, a thousand thanks. I can't tell you what a load of worry and responsibility you have taken from my tired old shoulders. These things are very hard on a sensitive woman."

"Good night, Duchess," I said coldly.

When she got to the door I called to her. One nasty crack I could not resist. "Duchess," I said, "may I add that for the first time I am beginning to suspect that very probably His Excellency really needed a run-out powder? . . . Good night, Gram."

III. EILEEN

1

I REALIZED that Gram and Ellena would not be taken in by my hay-fever apologia. I had had hay fever off and on for years. I'd had it from Maine to California, from Oregon to Florida. But it had never kept me from doing anything I wanted to do. So I did not for one minute think I was fooling them.

But I knew Dave would accept it. I gave him full credit for inviting us down. He was sorry for poor Gram, deserted, at her age, and he wanted to cheer her up. He wanted Ellena and me to take her off his hands and he was willing to foot the bills for his magnanimous gesture. I dare say he wanted us, too, in a way. Presentable wives and beautiful daughters are a definite military asset and Dave was suffering a minor perturbation over his recall to active duty after so many years out of service. He thought his morale could do with a little boosting but he did not really need it. Dave was sufficient, always sufficient.

As Gram and Ellena undoubtedly surmised, the plain truth is I did not want to go; I wanted to be alone for a while. I did not mind their seeing through the subterfuge. As long as Dave accepted it I was satisfied. And I knew he would accept it as he accepted all domestic matters, acquiescently, without question. And so he did.

I wanted to be alone to have time to think. In a way, I blamed it on the war. That is war's only virtue, it does bear the brunt of blame—all blame. But it was not the fighting war that affected me so strongly; it was the vague but unmistakable effect it had had on Father and Gram, His Excellency and the Duchess.

Their belated divorce impressed me profoundly. I wanted time to figure out my feeling about it and try to decide what was wrong—not with them but with me. The reactions of Dave and Ellena were obvious and understandable. Ellena was shocked to the core. To her it was simply indecent. According to movies and novels, and to

newspaper accounts also, the only earthly reason for anybody wanting a divorce was—another man or another woman. Passion. Sex. At their age, wanton indecency.

Dave was disgusted. He had always liked my father, had looked up to him, too, had enjoyed his unquenchable insouciance and cordial camaraderie. Now, quite suddenly, he was no longer the Ambassador, or His Excellency. He had become instantaneously an old fool, a darned old fool, a maudlin imbecile.

I did not say anything but I did not agree with either of them.

After the first shock of surprise, all I felt was an immense and overwhelming pride. I was proud of him and proud of her. This thing had taken courage—sheer, unmitigated, unquestionable courage. And they had that courage.

After forty respectable, rather gay years together they decided to stop living together and do something else. And so they had stopped living together and were doing other things.

Colossal courage! That's what it was! I was proud of them and I envied them from the bottom of my heart.

I, after twenty years, was fed up with my way of life, but I hadn't the courage to pull myself up to the edge of my rut and steal a timid glance into the rut adjoining.

So I was proud of them and abased and humiliated by my own cowardice.

When we reached our home in Orange after Gram's dramatic pronouncement of the surprising status quo, Ellena marched to the piano where we had large, handsomely framed photographs of my parents. She stood before Father's picture and glared at it. Then she slowly and firmly thumbed her nose.

"Shall we chuck it in the garbage or merely turn its face to the wall?" she demanded.

"He is still my father," I reminded her.

"Yes, I know. Poor mother! It's certainly nothing to be proud of. Do you feel a daughterly obligation to look it in the face every day?"

When his name came up she would exclaim "Him!" with a world of distaste in her voice, as if it nauseated her.

I was not sure it had happened as jauntily as Mother had recounted to us. And yet it would have been like him! And like

Mother to take it on the chin, with a gleam in her eye and a new hair-do. Even if her version was slightly colored, as I suspected, she was taking it well. And if it had been the other way round and the divorce had been her own idea slyly transplanted to him, still it had taken courage of a high order.

Only two things really hurt me. One was that it meant the end of the good times we had always had together—Mother, he and I, first; then the two of them with Dave and me; and then the quintet, with Ellena. All our times together had been good times. Some had been inspiring. A few had been downright rollicking. Dave always said that an hour with the Duchess and His Excellency was worth an eight-hour trip any day in the week.

So I was jealous. Jealous of their courage and jealous of their new freedom. I was not brave and I had no freedom.

I had nothing in particular against Dave. I was just tired of him. I had been tired of him for years. He was so unchanging, so unemotional, so boresomely dependable. He was tired of me, too. I sensed that. I always had to sense his emotions. Wild horses could not have dragged admission from him. I could hardly believe he was the dashing young officer home from the German Occupation after World War I who had swept me off my girlish feet and persuaded me to elope with him during my first year in college. It had all been thrilling at the time.

"I thought it was thrilling," I reminded myself. "I was just a fool of a girl. I didn't know what a thrill was."

But at least I had thought it was thrilling. Gram and Father, with their usual philosophy of accepting the inevitable, had accepted him as inevitable, received us cordially and affectionately and held nothing against either of us. I always suspected, and so did Dave, that it was through Father's broad-branching friendships and influence that he made such pleasant and profitable connections when he decided to leave the Army.

It had been thrilling having Ellena, too, and the first years of her childhood were thrilling. But more and more Dave settled down into an easy routine and reserved whatever unobtrusive talents he possessed for business and outside contacts. I had my home, a nice home, and Ellena, a nice daughter. And I had friends and clubs.

My friends considered me good company and I must have been, or they would not have continued inviting me when Dave was away so much and I was without escort. Nearly always some provision was made to include me and I got along all right. When Dave was at home we went places together and the stimulus of other company perked us both up and made us as convivial as in the earlier years. Publicly. But when we were alone together we were—just married. Married to the high heavens and back again!

We did not quarrel. I did not nag. He did not disapprove. We did not care enough to nag or disapprove. Everything I did was all right with him. I didn't know the details of what he was doing most of the time and I did not care. I went along being married, being respectable, mothering Ellena and telling myself that once she was brought up and settled I would take my life into my own hands.

Knowing all the time I wouldn't, that I would just go ahead being bored and respectable and married as long as I lived. And hating myself for it.

Now for the first time I felt a faint glimmer of hope. After all, I was their daughter; their blood was my blood. There must be something of their dauntless audacity in me somewhere.

So I wanted Ellena to go south to her father and leave me alone for a while. I wanted to explore my shallow depths in search of guts.

The second hurt was that they had conceived and carried through such a brilliant exploit without telling me. I did not expect them to ask my advice about anything but they might have told me. We had always been frank and confidential with one another, with the usual family reserves—rather aggravated reserves in their case, I fancy they were, but never obvious. Usually they told me what they were up to and gave me details when it was over.

A tremendous thing like this! I suppose they thought I would be horrified and disapproving, like Dave and Ellena. Perhaps they thought I would try to argue them out of it. They would never have dreamed that I was only grieved at not having a finger in such a magnificent adventure.

So I said "hay fever." Ellena lifted an eyebrow. Gram asked, by long-distance telephone, since when had I become allergic to the

Army. Dave said he was sorry—take care of myself and get a good rest and perhaps I should try a new doctor. Just what I expected from each of them.

I deliberately lived a changed life. I kept myself up most of the night, with company or shows or going places; then reading; eating a snack by myself at three or four o'clock in the morning. I slept most of the day.

I told Ida, my maid, never to disturb me for anything unless I was visible at the moment. I would not be called to the telephone or awakened for special deliveries. I invited people in and they invited me out and I took little trips alone into New York.

It was a change—that is all. It was not especially amusing and I did not feel any braver. I reminded myself that for the first time in my life I was a free woman—could keep any hours I fancied, sleep, eat, step out, stay in, anything I fancied. A free woman! But I knew I wasn't. There was Ellena, who would be coming home and looking for a position. There was Dave, knowing I was all right and could be counted on. And I *was* all right, curse it; I could be counted on, and I loathed myself for it.

I had written Father. I told him the Duchess had confessed all and we were much surprised and missed him at the family board, but I had done my best to bring them both up right and was not to be held accountable for their goings-on. My letter caught up with him in China. He wrote back a gay, unfatherly letter, as he always wrote, full of interesting experiences, amusing anecdotes, hairbreadth adventures. He sent his usual facetious admonitions to Dave and Ellena. And he did not mention the thing.

That was brave, too. Not trying to explain himself, not asking for understanding or for condoning. Just being himself.

The first letters from the South were what I expected. Ellena's were full of what she was doing—new friends she was making, old friends she had come across, dances, parties, shows. Gram said how nicely Dave was treating them and it was a real vacation for her. She said she heard the Army was working on a new insecticide that was going to obliterate ragweed pollen, so I'd better get out the doctor book and decide on a new disease for future alibis. Dave said everybody seemed to be having a good time, Gram was in good

spirits, Ellena having the time of her life, and he hoped my hay fever was better.

Then this from Ellena:

"Mother, darling, I am so glad you believe in love at first sight. I know from your elopement at eighteen you must believe in it. I am nineteen, darling, and I've got it, too. All of a sudden. I got it at a speechmaking. Mother, dear, help your troubled child. You've had so much experience with such things. How can a colonel's daughter learn the name of an enlisted man who stands fifteenth from the left of the second lieutenant in the first row on parade? That's the one I am in love with and it's very nice being in love but haven't you found it more satisfying to know who you are in love with? (Or whom.)"

I had a good laugh over that. Ellena and her love affairs! I wrote back, playfully sympathetic, and suggested she call on the FBI as they always get their man. I asked why, since she was in search of a job anyhow, she did not align herself with the organization and thus insure always getting all her men.

I was slightly disconcerted when she wrote that she had actually met the person and loved him more than ever—especially when she added that it turned out he was the protégé of some dear friend of Gram's and they were all just like cooing doves together. Gram's friends are fascinating but certainly not the type I would choose to sponsor my daughter's love affairs.

The next day came another letter. Ellena said she was engaged to him and it was the loveliest thing in the world and she was so happy it was almost wicked. She said that not by the wildest stretch of my imagination or most fantastic dreams could I realize how wonderful and sweet and lovable he was. Dad had met him and given him his blessing—given them both his blessing. Gram, while disclaiming responsibility and withholding any sanction, was not disapproving and admitted that she liked him very much, even apart from the halo he wore because of her friend's devotion to him.

"His name," she wrote, "is Clifford Lindley. We call him Cliff. Dad calls him Cliff, too."

I flung the letter aside in panic and rushed to the telephone. My daughter was engaged to a stranger whose only recommendation

was the endorsement of one of Gram's delightful but uncertain friends. I put in a long-distance call for Dave but before the receiver was back on the hook I reconsidered and hastily canceled the call. I ran back to my chair and reread the letter.

"I am engaged to him and it is the loveliest thing in the world." I skipped hurriedly over the ejaculatory sentences and concentrated on others.

"Dad has given him blessing." "Gram admits she likes him." "Dad calls him Cliff, too."

I knew she had put that in to assuage any lurking doubts of mine. If Dave had reached the Cliff-calling point, I should assume he was all a fastidious parent could desire for his only child. I think that made me more uneasy than anything else. I wouldn't want her to marry anyone like my own father, but I certainly did not wish her a lifetime of dull respectability like mine.

I read the entire letter once more, slowly, read it aloud. The shaking pages called my attention to my trembling hands.

One thing stood out in sharp distinction. Dave and Gram had known all about what was going on, had known for days. Both had written frequently and at some length but neither had mentioned it to me.

"Why mention it to me?" I asked myself bitterly. "After all, I am only her mother."

Lurking resentment rose to a burning rage. All this had gone on under their approving eyes, perhaps with their active connivance. Yet they wrote to me of the weather and the dances and army routine—even of food!

"They want Ellena to shoulder her own responsibility," I thought hotly. "They don't trust me or my judgment. They think I would probably just gum up the works. They want Ellena to be more like Mother and Father, not like me! They don't want me running her life! . . . Well, they are right about one thing. I want her to be more like them, too. God knows I wouldn't have her like me!"

I tried to tell myself that after the poor job I had made of picking a husband for myself, there was no reason for confidence in my ability to choose for her. But I did not want to choose. I only wanted to know. I only wanted . . .

I was honest enough to admit that in many ways Dave was all right. Certainly I could have done worse. . . . "Yes, and I could have done better!" I said hotly. . . . But could I?

Anyhow, it had taken courage and initiative for a nice girl like Ellena to track down such a meager clue as a parade position and then, under the eyes of Gram and Dave, get herself engaged to him and win their acquiescence if not their outright co-operation. Although I was not sure but they had adroitly managed the whole affair between them and she was the innocent victim.

Still, she had picked him out. She had wanted to find him and she had found him. Ellena had it, too. Courage. And initiative. I envied her. What she wanted, she set about getting . . . and got it. When she no longer wanted it, she would have the courage to lay it aside and go on to something else. Courage!

My rage simmered down to crafty planning. Very well. This was the way they had wanted it—just this way they should have it!

If they were only making a show of acquiescence to win Ellena's loving gratitude, depending on me to antagonize her by some gentle cracking-down, they were going to be disappointed. I, too, would be acquiescent and co-operative. They had instigated this thing, or were, at the very least, tolerating it pleasantly. I, too, would tolerate it pleasantly. I would go them one better; I would be enthusiastic.

"They remember," I thought carefully, "that I thought I was in love with the first man who actually proposed to me and haven't the background of experience to help me guide her wisely."

A little spiteful, a little venomous perhaps, but not to the extent of sacrificing Ellena. Never to that point! But in the meantime—and thank God I had a meantime—I would not be their cat's-paw. What they had accepted was acceptable to me.

2

I wrote to Dave and the Duchess casually, cordially, just as I had always written and as they were writing to me. But I wrote to Ellena every day—sympathetic, interested, excited, motherly letters,

without a word of anxiety or doubt, only with love and eager anticipation. I asked for Cliff's address—I, too, called him Cliff. He had been sent to officers' training school for engineers in Virginia. I wrote him there, calling him Cliff. I invited him to spend with us whatever off-duty time was coming to him. I assured him that since I was a helpless minority anyhow I would never dream of trying to buck the family consensus. He sent the letter back to Ellena and she called me up long-distance, crying over the telephone, thanking me, saying she loved me, wishing she could hurry home.

I still heard from Gram and from Dave, but there was never a mention of Cliff, or Ellena's betrothal. I answered the letters, with no word from my far-off side of the fence. Ellena wrote reams, page after page after page, and her sole inexhaustible subject was Cliff. I answered in the same spirit, warm to the point of ardor. Cliff. The color of his eyes. The exact shade of his hair. His Middle Western accent. He said "wotter." We covered Cliff thoroughly.

When word came that they were returning home I wrote air mail asking if they would like me to join them in Washington for a few days. The answer came from Ellena, now my most ardent correspondent.

"Gram says to tell you they tried out the insecticide on the White House and it didn't do a thing for the pollen of politics, so Washington is rife with it and you'd better not take a chance. It doesn't make sense, Mother—it's just the usual tripe she calls conversation. The real point is that Cliff will get a few days off after a while and he can make it as far as Washington and of course you and I will want to be there. But chiefly and first of all, Mother, I want to see you alone to tell you all about everything.

"Gram has been lovely to both of us, all the time, but she is flowery and vague and refuses to discuss things seriously. She says the whole affair is exclusively up to you, and it makes conversation difficult since I cannot talk of anything else. I am not sure she entirely approves, though she likes Cliff. I suppose, poor dear, after her horrible experience with That Creature she doesn't think any man or any marriage can be entirely trusted and I can't really blame her. Though she ought to realize that Cliff and Dad are not at all

like that. Oh, it will be so different, talking to you. I can hardly wait."

There was hard rain the day she came, so I did not meet her at the station. She took a taxi to the house. I stood at the window watching as she swung out of the cab, swung eagerly up the flagstone walk toward the house . . . long steps . . . carrying her suitcase lightly . . . a corsage at her lapel. Her head was high, her shining face wet with rain.

"Brave," I said, watching her. "Brave feet, brave head, brave heart."

I felt myself put to shame.

I met her at the open door. She dropped her bag and threw both arms around me. She was laughing. But she put her face to mine and tears came, tears and sobs, great, gulping sobs. More laughter with it. I held her quietly in my arms, kissing her, laughing too, with tears on my own cheeks.

Suddenly she shook her head vigorously, dashing away tears and rain drops, still laughing. "I'm so happy, Mother," she said. "Isn't it a crime there's a war on to keep us apart when we want so much to be together?"

I laughed with her. I did not mention that it seemed a very small charge to be added to the gigantic wickedness of war.

She tossed away her hat. She took off her small light coat and carefully removed the corsage. The coat she dropped to the floor but held the corsage tenderly and kissed it.

"It's a little wilted but I love it," she said. "He sent it to me the day we left. When it is entirely dead I shall take it tenderly apart, petal by petal, and do something with it . . . oh, maybe tuck it into a little sachet so it can be buried with me, over my heart."

We laughed together again.

"You really are in love, pet," I said.

"Did you doubt it?" she asked, all wide-eyed surprise. "No, I know you didn't doubt it, Mother. You couldn't help distinguishing the real from all the small imitations. Do you remember how I always used to deny it in the first stages, any one of my minor crushes, being a little ashamed and not at all sure. This time I am

very sure and very proud and I want to shout it from the housetops. He's wonderful, Mother. He's just wonderful."

Ida came in, beaming, to suggest tea. Ellena kissed her.

"You must be more respectful to me from this on," she said. "I'm virtually an old married woman now."

"You's lookin' older ever' day, Miss 'Lena," Ida said, "but I can't see as you look any marrieder 'an you allays did."

Ellena was still holding the corsage gently in both hands.

"Shall I set that posy in water?" Ida offered.

"No. No, thanks, Ida. I want to do it myself. It is a very special posy."

Ellena fetched a small vase of water and set it down on the coffee table. She gave the flower one more tender touch and smiled at me.

She seemed different. Or perhaps I saw her differently. She looked at me, not so much daughter-to-mother as formerly, but as woman to woman—to a woman she expected to understand her every sweet emotion. I think I understood her. In spite of her happiness, which made such a shine about her, there was something else—wonder, or maybe fear, something serious behind her bright eyes. And there was a deepened undertone to her fresh young voice.

"It's the war," I thought. "It's not just being in love. It's war that sets a dark cloud behind the rainbow of love."

We sat down on the couch, close together, holding hands, smiling. Ida came in with the tea tray. We neglected to fill the cups. Ellena began to talk. She talked and talked. She told me everything she knew about Cliff. It was not very much. She added tender details, confiding as fully as love can be confided to one outside, even when the one outside is a mother.

Her voice changed suddenly. "Mother, did you ever meet Gram's old friend, Dean Fanshaw?"

"No, I never heard of him."

"Neither did I. He's the dean of Cliff's college. He's a particular friend of Gram. She says."

She dropped that subject and went on talking. Talking about Cliff. Patting my knee sometimes, squeezing my hand. Always smiling.

She said Dad had amazed her. She would never have dreamed he could be so sympathetic, so understanding. She said he had accepted everything, not grudgingly, but almost with pleasure.

"And I knew, Mother, though it was so long ago, he was remembering how things had been with you and him. He was thinking backward. You can't imagine how he rose to it. Sometimes, Mother—before this, I mean—he has seemed a little . . . well, not altogether interested. He wasn't like that at all this time. He always looked at me so—so gently, Mother. And he likes Cliff. He really likes him."

"Why didn't he write me about it?"

She hesitated briefly. "Well, he said he thought Gram should tell you because she was the friend of that dean. And Gram thought it would be—well, rather an interference on her part, for after all she is not actually one of us. And I told them both please to lay off because I wanted to tell you myself."

"Was that exactly what they both said?" I persisted quietly.

"Well, not exactly. You know how they talk, Mother. Dad with such cold brevity and Gram with her vague vivacity. That was why I wanted to tell you myself. I didn't want you to get it with cold brevity from Dad or with vague vivacity from Gram. Just straight from me, Mother. Like this. With my heart on the tip of my tongue, speaking with my lips."

"Thank you, Ellena. This is the way I want it."

Ida called us to dinner and the conversation went on. The meal was almost as untouched as the tea had been.

Afterward we went upstairs and she read me some of his letters, excerpts from them, breaking off now and again, "Oh, no, not that" . . . "Not that" . . . "Here, this."

"I suppose the omissions are not important," I said.

"They are the most important part," she said frankly. "But you wouldn't be interested . . . Yes, you would be interested, Mother, because you are still interested in love, but they are just——"

"Just love-making," I suggested.

"Not love-making," she corrected me. "Just love. Our love is already made."

She unpacked her bag, gave me small presents from the South. She

showed me his photograph. A nice picture; nice face. She kissed it fondly.

"Would you like to kiss your coming son?" she asked.

"I'd better salute the ear," I said, humoring her. "The lips are beginning to wear thin."

We got ready for bed, slowly, talking back and forth between our rooms and interrupted by many passages through the corridor, with "Listen to this" or "Look at this."

When at last we were ready to retire she came into my room, boyish flannel robe belted tightly at the waist, and perched on the foot of the bed. I propped myself up with pillows.

"Mother," she began, "I don't want to worry you but—do you think maybe Gram is getting a little childish?"

"I hadn't thought so. Why? Has she changed much?"

"No, not much. Not on the surface anyhow. But . . . you don't think maybe she is a little . . . well . . . off balance, do you?"

"Off balance, Ellena? What do you mean? What happened? Whatever gave you such an idea?"

"I didn't think of it in the first place. Cliff did. He asked me if she was a little—well, queer. . . . Oh, nothing serious, Mother. Nothing dangerous. And after all, poor darling, after all she's gone through—at her age——"

"I thought she was going through things very well. Dad said so. And her age has hardly reached the point of second childhood, if that's what you are driving at. What happened?"

"Oh, nothing happened, Mother. Not a thing. Don't be uneasy. It was just—well, you know this Dean Fanshaw that she dotes on."

"It is a new dotage to me. I never heard of him."

"That's just it. It's such a new dotage. He really is the dean of Cliff's college but Cliff was just one of about ten thousand students under him and the Dean has been having them by thousands for years. But the minute Cliff said he was from that college, Gram fairly leaped at him and concluded he was a bosom friend and pet protégé of her adored Dean and she virtually adopted him. I was right there and I give you my word Cliff didn't say any such thing. He tried to deny it, too, and said the Dean wouldn't remember him

from Adam but he couldn't talk her out of it. It was a perfect obsession with her. So he asked me confidentially if she wasn't just a trifle—well, eccentric.”

“Of course she is eccentric. She always has been and always will be. That's what makes her so amusing.”

“But she carries it pretty far, Mother. Do you know what she's going to do? She's going to write the Dean and tell him his favorite alumnus is going to marry her granddaughter and she thinks he will be enchanted. Well, Cliff isn't at all enchanted. He says the Dean will think he's trying to pull a fast one and foist himself off as something he isn't. But Cliff didn't do it, Mother. I was right there. She just snatched the idea out of the ether and hung onto it. She didn't do a bit of snooping into Cliff's past, present or future. She accepted him instantaneously with love and kisses—because of Dean Fanshaw.”

“To one who knows her as well as I do, I must say that would seem among the least of her aberrations.”

“Yes, maybe. Or . . . Mother, do you suppose she wired Dean Fanshaw privately that day for a checkup of Cliff's record? She might have done it on the sly and said nothing about it. Otherwise, it seems strange for her to have taken him into her arms the way she did. Do you suppose she telegraphed out there for a report?”

“No, Ellena, I am quite sure she did no such thing. I think she took a fancy to your young man and she takes her fancies hard. She has a lot more confidence in what she considers her own unerring judgment than in the report of any doddering and befuddled old dean or set of college statistics. It would be most unlike her to wire for confirmation of her own opinion. She's far too conceited for that.”

“Well, I hope so. . . . We are quarreling already, Mother.” Ellena was off again. “Cliff and I, I mean. He thinks we should wait until after the war to get married and I disagree with him. Acutely. He's afraid he might get killed and leave me a widow. But if he were killed I would be a widow at heart, anyhow, and I'd rather have the name along with the pain. Don't you think I am right, Mother? You and Dad didn't wait.”

I refrained from the dry comment that it would have been better if we had. “That's one nice thing about Time,” I said, smilingly.

"It has such a neat way of working things out to a conclusion. And since Cliff will be at OCS for several months, Time will have a chance to do his stuff. But Ellena, be sure of this: if marriage seems after a while to be on the books for you, I will not do any calendar-thumbing."

She flung herself over the bed and kissed me. "I know, Mother," she said happily. "I knew it all the time. When Gram and Dad were so angelic about everything I knew they were counting on you to slow things up. But I knew all the time I could depend on you. And, Mother, down there, for the first time, I realized how things had been with you and Dad. I never appreciated him so much. Oh, he's always been a grand parent and all that, and I adore him, but he never seemed at all romantic or exciting. Not half so much so as That Awful Person. But I realized that this quietness and understanding between you and him is the ripe result of all the happy years together. That marriage comes to mean confidence and a sort of—well, a sort of innate, unspoken understanding, which doesn't require wisecracks and repartee to keep it going. I felt it was something wonderful to look forward to. Of course, I don't think Cliff and I can ever settle down and take life for granted like you and Dad—we're too much in love and too excited and it's all too thrilling for that. It will always be exciting to us."

I didn't spoil it with a word. Check that up to my small credit. "You will be grateful for some quiet times, too," I said gently. "Quiet, secure, confident times. I fancy excitement would get a little harrowing as a steady diet—after twenty or thirty years."

"It always seemed a little exciting with Gram and That Man. It seemed so then. I know now it was all put on, all 'front.' There will never be anything like that between Cliff and me, Mother. No front. It goes clear down to the bottom of our hearts."

3

There was a subtle but unmistakable change in the relationship between us. Always it had been cordial and friendly, mother-and-daughterly in a nice way. Now it was different. I was regarding Ellena with the respect due a superior character. Ellena had stepped

me up to a pedestal of her own creating, giving me credit for values she attributed to new understanding and appreciation. I did not try to enlighten her.

She frequently voiced this change in her attitude. "I can't begin to tell you how happy I am about you and Dad, Mother. It makes the whole world seem a different place. I wake up at night trembling with pleasure, knowing that after so many years you still remember how wonderful and how sweet it was. I was so sure you had forgotten and I thank God I was wrong. How could I ever have thought you had grown indifferent? Knowing that you both remember so vividly, after twenty years, gives me confidence, Mother, makes me realize how worth while it all is. Gram's trouble with That Man would have frightened me except that your twenty years with Dad cancel it right off the books."

I said nothing. After all, children cannot learn by their parents' problems nor profit by their mistakes. They have to solve their own problems and suffer for their own mistakes.

There was a letter from Dave the day after she reached home. I expected the letter and knew almost verbatim what he would say.

"I suppose Ellena has let you in on the new volcanic betrothal. Don't let it worry you. Another flash in the pan. They think right now that this one will last forever. We know better. He's an engineer and engineers are needed, so he will be shipped out pretty pronto. He's not at all a bad youngster. I checked his records. They are good. I met him at dinner. Quite presentable; capable I am sure; rather clever. Very likable.

"Don't let the Duchess fool you. She's crazy about him. She will probably try to disparage him to you, her slick little way of enlisting you on their side. Don't be taken in by anything she says. It's all bluff. She dotes on him. I'm not sure but it's one of those mad December-March romances we read about; on her part, I mean. He's all out for Ellena right now. Nothing to worry about, anyhow."

I was not worried. Just jealous. Jealous and humble.

Ellena looked only half-heartedly for a position, determined not to be tied down by anything at any time when she could see Cliff and when one was thrown at her, one so advantageous she could hardly escape it, she took it on with the stout proviso that she could

go to Washington whenever she needed to go to Washington. So she worked and I signed up for nurse's aide and Red Cross training courses. In our off hours we talked, wrote and read letters. And waited.

It was two months later, almost midwinter, when Cliff got the coveted three-day leave and after considerable expensive long-distance telephoning and wiring, it was arranged that we were to meet in Washington for the brief reunion. Ellena, acting upon what she considered new and admiring understanding of our subdued but unsubmerged romance, invited her father to join us there. He, apparently inordinately busy for some reason, although even New Jersey was already rampant with idling uniforms, could not take the week end but agreed to fly up for Sunday.

Ellena and I went down, in our best raiment, exalted by the most expensive hair-dressing and manicuring to be had in New York. But Ellena did not require outside exaltation. She was pale but shining. Still and lifted-up. She hardly spoke at all. Just sat motionless, shining. Once in a while she reached over and took my hand.

"Mother, love him. Please love him."

"I do, Ellena. I love him already. How could I help it, with the three of you a solid and loyal phalanx behind him? I love him all right."

"But I want you to love him all for himself. Apart from us. Try, Mother. Please try."

I liked him. He looked young and eager and a little tired; a little frightened, too. I felt that he had not at all expected me to be what I so patently am. I knew why. Between Gram's pretty, effervescent enthusiasms and Ellena's ardent, lovely forthrightness, I struck a quiet and unexciting chord.

He was direct enough. Before one polite hour had passed he said, "Mrs. Courtney, may I tell my mother that Ellena and I are going to be married—sometime?"

I was surprised. "Haven't you told her?"

"I have told her about Ellena, of course. But I didn't say things were settled. The Colonel and the Duchess are so easy—I mean, Ellena can handle them so smoothly—that I had to wait for you to

give official sanction. It really scared me. I didn't want to tell her everything is all set until— Of course, if we have to elope, that's all right. We will. But it would be improper to notify my parent in advance of an elopement, wouldn't it?"

I laughed. "If I remember all the reports about you—and I think I do—the first and foremost was that you handle the dictionary like a Webster. Well, you made a mess of that paragraph but I think I know what you mean. You want to know if I am going to throw a monkey wrench into the engagement. I am not."

He looked more disconcerted than pleased. "You're not?"

"I am not."

"There's something wrong with the whole family," he said. "You look perfectly normal but . . . the Duchess must be contagious."

Speaking of the Duchess, she was the correct hostess, courteous, charming, attentive, a little on the formal side. She did not mention her precious Dean. Nobody mentioned him. And nobody mentioned His Excellency.

And Dave, as always was right. Gram loved the boy. She ignored him as much as possible, she was attentive to him in formal and rather affected ways, she had the house running like clockwork and had gone to considerable expense for flowers and small effective extras, but she was chucking the betrothal over to me. She didn't fool me a bit.

Women are terrible. When you think how the dumbest female in the world can pull the wool over the wise eyes of the era's outstanding sage! But you can't fool a woman. I mean, women can't. Men don't even have to try!

Dave came, as planned, on Sunday. In twenty years I had never known him to miss a plan. When we were at dinner on that Sunday night, Ellena announced that if she had anything to say about it—and she obviously had a good deal to say about everything—she and Cliff were going to be married as soon as he finished OCS. Cliff was slightly embarrassed at the publicity but his eyes were eager.

"Don't muff your courses, Cliff," Dave said quietly. "If you're too slow about it, there won't be anybody on hand to give the bride away. I shall not be in these parts much longer."

We looked at him. He did not raise his eyes from his plate.

"Dad!" Ellena gasped. "You don't mean—overseas! Not you!"

"Where else? And, for that matter, who else? There's plenty of war going on here at home and more in the offing, but not the kind you shoot out with tommy guns. I'm still a crack shot, remember."

"You've gained weight," Gram said. "You'll make a bigger and better target."

"Thank you. But that is not the height of my ambition."

"Dad, they won't send you overseas!" Ellena protested, a little wildly. "I thought this was a young man's war."

"So it is. But they've got to have a few of us old codgers on hand to lead them around by the nose. They didn't give us those tough refresher courses to wear out the cushions on swivel chairs."

He really expected to go. I thought at first it was a form of pretense, maybe vain pride, though usually he had none of that. I had often wished he had more. He might have been making a little show, before Cliff and before us, that he was not too old and there was a place for him. But it was not like Dave.

We were shocked. We had never dreamed he would be shipped out. In training camps here, perhaps; a desk chair in Washington probably. That had been our bland assumption from the beginning. But now he thought he was going. And he was going, or he would never have mentioned it.

Ellena plied him with questions. He insisted he had no idea when, no idea where. But he was going.

"You have to be here for the wedding, Dad," Ellena said earnestly. "You have to be here! You know so exactly how we feel about everything and—oh, you have to be here!"

"Better make it snappy then," he said. But he was pleased by her insistence.

Gram and I said nothing.

A little later he said, more slowly, "I was wondering if it wouldn't be a good idea for you gals to team up for the duration. Cliff and I will be away and His Excellency—well, it might be a good idea for you to team up. There's a housing shortage already and it's going to be worse; fuel and gas, too, and nobody knows right now just what else will be short, but it will be plenty. It will cut down on the overhead, too—a big argument for us husbands."

We three, Gram, Ellena and I, looked at one another. We were all pale, all breathless. It was a new idea to us. There would be advantages, of course, and there would be disadvantages.

"Will you come up to Orange with us, Gram?" I asked.

"Certainly not! I wouldn't dream of cooping myself off up there for the duration. Besides, I like to run my own house. You and Ellena may come here if you like."

"But Ellena has a job and I have my war work and——"

"I'd rather come here," Ellena said quickly. "It's closer to Cliff."

"But your job, Ellena."

"I can get a job here. They are howling their heads off for good-looking girls, with brains or without."

"Would you rent the house furnished, Eileen?" Gram asked abruptly.

I was shocked at the pallor and the intensity of their two faces, Gram's and Ellena's. The war was really getting its hooks into us. Cliff looked eager and hopeful. Washington is much nearer Virginia than New Jersey is. Dave went placidly along with his dinner.

"Do you want us to come here, Dave?" I asked.

"I think you should team up somewhere," he said. "Here or there. No difference. There are going to be a lot of changes before we're through with this. You should have a private battleground of your own for the duration to get yourselves shaped up to cope with your returning warriors."

"But would you rather we came here or stayed there?" I persisted.

"No difference. No difference at all. I think Gram would be happier in her own house. . . . Not that she merits any special happiness. You would be more in the heart of things here. And as Ellena says, closer to Cliff. No difference to me."

"I suppose we could rent the house," I said faintly. "They are clamoring for houses. We would have to make a few changes and store some things."

"Get a good price for it," Gram said briskly. "It's human nature to wreak havoc with things that belong to somebody else."

"Do you want us to get together as soon as we can or wait until you go? . . . If you go," I asked Dave uneasily.

A barely perceptible pause. "No difference," he said briefly. "I

should think the sooner the better. I would be relieved to have you settled somewhere before I go."

"Are you sure you are going, Dad?" Ellena asked anxiously.

"Yes. I'm sure."

"Couldn't you get out of it?" she demanded.

"Oh, probably. I am not going to try."

"You could get here oftener before you go," Gram said helpfully. "It's ghastly getting up to Orange. Changing trains, missing connections, waiting for buses—ghastly! That's one good thing about Washington. You can get to it."

"Yes," he agreed.

"It may take quite a while," I said. "Getting the place ready, finding a desirable tenant, moving ourselves out——"

"No hurry," he said quietly. "Take your time and do it right so you will be satisfied when it's over."

"Gram, won't you consider coming up with us? It is so cool in summer and so much quieter."

"Yes, it's cooler in summer and colder in winter and duller all the year round," she said decisively. "I wouldn't think of it."

"You could get a fabulous rental for this house," I reminded her.

"Yes. Along with fabulous wear and tear on my furniture, to say nothing of my aging nerves," she said coldly.

"Do you really want us to come here, Mother?"

She hesitated. "Yes," she said slowly, "I think I do, Eileen. I hadn't got around to the point of thinking of it myself; it would have come to me in time, I suppose. But I think Dave is right. We should team up for the duration."

"Dad," Ellena broke in suddenly, "do you think you will go before Cliff does?"

"I think so. Yes. He has to finish training. I've had mine."

"Then how soon do you think we should get married?" she asked feverishly.

He smiled at her. "No hurry. Take your time. Getting married is a thing that can stand a little time-taking."

"You didn't take much time yourself," she reminded him.

"No. Your mother is so impetuous."

We laughed but we did not feel like laughing. I understood Dave

very well. I knew he had brought up the idea of our teaming up for the duration immediately after announcing that he was going overseas to take our minds off that startling news and give us something else to think about. And I knew he had saved all of it until evening so he would soon be leaving and the decision would be up to us.

When we left the table and moved into the living room, Ellena went over and sat on his knees, her arms around him. "Dad," she said brokenly, "I never thought you would have to go. I haven't taken this war seriously enough."

"No hurry about that either," he said quietly. "You'll be taking it mighty damn seriously before it's over."

It did not seem strange that Cliff, so nearly a stranger although engaged to Ellena, should be present at this serious family discussion. He said nothing. His eyes, dark with distress over our problems, were on Ellena mostly but occasionally turned to one or another of us. Ellena was crying a little, softly, her head on her father's shoulder. Dave patted her gently.

"Cliff," he said, "has it occurred to you that my three ladies consider me too old and decrepit to tackle this war? Don't stick around for twenty years, my boy. They'll have you in ear muffs and house slippers."

Ellena went over quickly and sat by Cliff. She took his hand in hers. "Yes, he is going to stick around twenty years. He's going to stick around forty years like—— He's going to stick around forever," she ended hastily. "Aren't you, Cliff?"

"My hope and my sinister intention," he said.

We smiled but we were still solemn with shock. The Duchess was more upset than I had ever seen her. Her eyes looked dazed and frightened. I think, with His Excellency gone, she had been depending on Dave, expecting him to be there, casual, competent, unquestioning.

"I forgot to mention, my dear Duchess," he said, "that if you feel your delicate eardrums can tolerate the presence of my two chatter-boxes, you stand to make a little war graft on the side. I will foot all household expenses but not one cent for wear and tear on nerves and furniture."

"I can sue you if I have to," she said. "It's quite fashionable to sue."

"Sorry I can't be on hand to help with the upheaving," Dave said to me. "I'll try to be there for the moving out and coming down. If I'm still here."

"Dave," Gram said sternly, "you know when you are going."

"No, I don't," he said honestly. "But if I did I couldn't tell you. And we may not go as soon as we expect. I know men who were slated to go six months ago and are still here. But as long as it's in the books that I am going, we may as well figure accordingly. Is it going to work any particular hardship on you if I'm here a few months longer than I expect? I won't be right in the house with you, you know. I'll be a couple of states away."

They left together, Dave and Cliff. Cliff was taking the train for Belvoir, Dave flying to Fort Jackson. I did not see Dave alone. There was no need. He had said all he had to say. I knew all his plans would be perfected, his papers in order, every detail punctiliously worked out.

"You must get another leave soon, Cliff, for our wedding," Ellena said, as we stood together at the door. "You could never get accommodations for all of us down there. But if you can't get leave, we'll come anyhow, *sans* accommodations. Just be sure to meet us with preacher and license on the same leash."

Cliff held her in his arms. He said nothing. Mother and I kissed Dave and then while Ellena hugged her father, whimpering a little, we kissed Cliff. He tried to say we had been nice to him and he was grateful but the Duchess airily waved away his words.

"There's been entirely too much conversation around here already," she said. "We are usually much less talkative."

Ellena went to Cliff again, and Mother and I moved past them and talked to Dave, waiting at the top of the steps.

"Anchors aweigh, my lad," he said suddenly. Cliff went at once.

We did not say good-by. They, Dave and Cliff, turned at the curb and waved to us before getting into the waiting cab. We waved too.

When the door closed Gram said abruptly, "Well, one good thing, we don't have to let Dave Courtney run us. We can do as we please

until he gets another leave. Right now, I please to go to bed. You girls talk it over and give me the gist in the morning. But not before coffee. No gists before coffee."

4

We decided to team up. I had known from the beginning that we would. I kept telling myself that this was a good time for me to begin putting my foot down and standing out against everybody on every issue. But I did not. Dave had suggested it. Ellena wanted it. Gram was satisfied.

The thing was done.

I thought it was the right thing to do. It would make a complete, instantaneous, irrevocable break in the twenty-year stretch. In a way, it was a jail break.

"A jail break," I told myself derisively. "Accompanied by two sharp-eyed, sharp-witted jailors, Gram and Ellena." Still, a jail break.

We stayed in Washington three days, making plans, arranging necessary readjustments. Gram assumed that she would keep her own room naturally, the one that had been hers and Father's. Ellena could not understand why she did not loathe the room and all its memories and associations. There was no obvious loathing. I was to have the big guest room at the front of the house, the one with twin beds, for convenience when Dave came up on leave. Ellena would take the small room across the corridor, the one that had been mine when I was at home as a girl.

Gram offered to remove or rearrange any furnishings if we wished to bring some of our personal things down with us but I decided against it. The things I prized too highly for casual rental would be stored. I did not want to be cluttered up between two houses. Easier, I thought, escaping from one house than from two.

There was a minor complication about Hortense. She had been with Gram over twenty years. She was married but marriage had never interfered with her devoted service. Now, most unexpectedly, she was by way of having a baby. She postponed the confidence as long as she could.

Gram was furious. She said that louse, Hortense's husband, was trying to build himself up a family hoping thereby to escape the war. Whatever the motive, there was nothing Gram could do about it. Hortense had given up her snug apartment on the third floor and was for the first time living domestically with her husband, awaiting the blessed event. Hortense had never done the house laundry and the usual laundress had taken unto herself a neat little war job, but we agreed that we could chivvy out our small silks in the lavatory and utilize the steam laundry for bed linens and bath towels.

There was a stack of mail awaiting us when we reached our home in Orange and I did not immediately notice that Ellena was intent over one particular letter. I skimmed through mine and glanced across at her. She was regarding me with odd intentness.

"I have a letter from Cliff's mother," she said. "Would you like to read it?"

I read the letter slowly. I had never dreamed that we were so provincial, so hidebound to our own communities and our own groups. Certainly I had gone all out to meet Cliff, and not just halfway. I knew he had studied for engineering. He had remarked casually that his family had a couple of farms. I had most definitely thought his mother was a farm woman.

Her letter was cordial, dignified and witty: She said that she and her daughter had begun to feel they were a couple of feminine flops because neither of her sons had shown marital inclinations; they were delighted beyond words that Cliff had decided women were not expendable and was staking out a claim for himself. She said she was sending Ellena a little gift.

"I picked them up in Italy a good many years ago," she wrote, "because they were so lovely I couldn't resist them. I never wore them myself, they are too dainty for me. But if you are as exquisite as Cliff thinks, they should be perfect for you."

She wrote on, pleasantly, and wished that Ellena could visit them. She said they were a good deal bothered by the war. Her daughter's husband was already in North Africa, leaving two small children behind him. She thanked God that Bob, her baby, was still struggling with Trigonometry so they had one home tie. And then she added:

"Cliff says your mother eloped in her first year at Smith and got herself nicely married. How lovely! I had no such luck myself. I just plugged patiently through and came out with what they call *cum laude* and a Phi Beta Kappa key but I abandoned both at the first opportunity and have lived happily ever after."

I looked at Ellena. Ellena was looking at me.

"A nice family you picked out to marry into," I said, rather weakly. "*Cum laude* and a Phi Beta Kappa key. If I hadn't eloped I would have flunked my first year."

"Yes, I know," she said dazedly. "Cliff's a hypocrite. I thought she was a farmer."

The "little gift" was a pair of bracelets of delicately wrought silver and set with lapis. Ellena examined them excitedly. "The old gray mare, she ain't what she used to be," she said expressively. "Hand-wrought silver and lapis!"

We had no trouble renting the house, with the wide range of tenants to choose among. We put our most precious things in storage. We cleaned closets and drawers, signed papers, packed our personal baggage and moved down to Gram in Washington. Dave could not even take time off to meet us there on arrival.

Ellena at once landed a hypothetical job in the fabulous Pentagon and as she said, lost herself there professionally in its labyrinthine corridors. I signed up for five hours a day as nurse's aide.

Everything went along like clockwork. Cliff did all right at OCS and got his commission. Also a five-day leave which he spent rapturously with us, before reporting back to Belvoir for his first assignment.

If Hortense's husband had expected his belated progeny to guarantee him the quiet comforts of the District for the duration, he suffered cruel awakening. He was inducted with scant ceremony. Hortense had her baby without the solace of his company. She took great pleasure in her allotment from the United States Treasury and arranged for the baby's care so she could come to us every afternoon.

There were a good many changes but nothing really painful. We took care of our own rooms and did our own fine laundering. Gram

took over the details of keeping the living rooms fresh and sweet and did it so unobtrusively that we forgot there is a real chore behind dust and ash receivers and wilting flowers.

It was December, December of 1942, when Dave called by long distance to say that he had a ten-day leave at last and to ask if there was a spare bed available.

He looked very well. Younger, brisker, very alert. Either some pounds had gone into the discard or his uniforms were better tailored. The expected "step" had come through and he wore his new star complacently. He was in good spirits, teased the Duchess, petted Ellena. Took me for granted, all as usual.

It was at dinner that he said, almost gaily—at least it was as near gaiety as he ever came—a couple of blocks maybe: "Now the moot point is, who is to get the benefit of this leave, you spoiled women or I? Because it is the last leave I am going to get and it's the last you are going to be seeing of me until I bring you a few Nazi scalps on a silver salver. They will probably have dan-druff."

Gram went quite pale. A sudden flash of crimson swept up from Ellena's slim throat and suffused her face. Her hands stopped instantly, poised in air, motionless. I know this and remember it. Because I looked at them. I looked at them to keep my eyes away from Dave.

"Oh, I know you think I am a decrepit and doddering old man," he went on, still in that almost gay voice, still smiling. "But the War Department thinks you are a trio of nuts. The War Department won't budge a step without me plodding along to lend a strong right arm when the tanks bog down in the historic mud of Europe."

Ellena's hands dropped suddenly. She got up from her chair and stood beside him. The flash of color was gone. She was pale. Her lipstick made an ugly scar on her white face. I looked quickly at Gram. She had lifted her water glass and was touching it delicately to her lips. Her eyes were on Dave, quietly, but they were dark, a little frightened.

Ellena had both arms around her father. She was down on her

knees beside him. This had happened during my brief glance at Gram.

"Dad, is this your last leave? Are you going to war—where the war is?"

"It's the only place one can go to war, isn't it?"

Ellena stood up. "I must call Cliff," she said. "He must come quickly. There isn't a minute to waste."

We sat in absolute silence while she went to the hall telephone and put in the long-distance call to Belvoir. Gram still held her glass and touched it now and then to her lips, slowly, but did not drink. I ventured a veiled glance at Dave. He still wore the odd, half-smirking smile.

Ellena came back to the table. She shoved her plate inelegantly away from her and squeezed her arms together, looking at her father.

"Dave," the Duchess said, in a silky, still voice, "you want to go, don't you?"

"Of course! Of course I want to go!" His voice sounded loud, almost brazen, in the quiet room. "This is what I was trained for. I was a fool ever to have left the Army. You bet I want to go."

"All right," she said quietly. "I just wanted to be sure." Her voice changed abruptly. "If it wasn't for that damned baby we'd make a pet of you and feed you up."

"Baby!" he ejaculated.

"Hortense's," she explained.

He laughed heartily. "Oh, I see. You mean you would let Hortense pet me and feed me up and——"

"Mista Dave," Hortense broke in, "I heared ever' word and I'm gonna pet you an' feed you up anyhow—an' in my opinion a high-class sa'geant is still—but Mista Dave, Kunnel, if you evah run across that wuthless low-down niggah is my husban', will you jus' kin'ly set him peelin' potatoes an' sich 'cause that wuthless low-down niggah he can' stan' guns? He can' stan' 'em, Mista Dave, Kunnel. I nevah thought much o' that niggah, but Mista Dave, Kunnel, with this here now baby, I gotta have he'p. I don't give no nevah-min' 'bout no 'lotment. I don' give no nevah-min' 'bout money. I kin wuk an' git

myself my own money. But with this here now baby, I gotta have he'p."

We were all able to laugh at that, Dave rather more loudly than usual, but we all laughed.

The evening passed off, draggingly, and we went upstairs. Ellena was waiting, tense and white, for her telephone call from Belvoir.

"See here," Dave said. "Is this affair as serious as it seems to be?"

"Ellena and Cliff? Why, yes, I think so. For the time being."

"Oh, yes, it always is, for the time being. But shouldn't it begin to wear thin by this time?"

"Occasionally it lasts quite a while," I reminded him.

"Not with Ellena," he contradicted quickly. "At least, never before. War has the damndest effect on women, hasn't it?"

"Do you think so? I should think it would have a good effect on us. Sort of wake us up and sober us down to realities."

"Not at her age. What are you going to do about it if she sticks to this notion of marrying him before he ships out? Are you going to stand for it?"

"What else can I do? Can you imagine me in the role of a stern parent forbidding the banns?"

He smiled suddenly. "No, to tell the truth, I cannot imagine it. Well, what about me? Do you think I should crack down? Do you want me to slow things up?"

"Do you think you could—at this stage of affairs?" I asked dryly. "Maybe in the beginning—but now?"

"I could try," he said. "I might have some influence. She seems a little—well, fonder of me than she used to be. I'd hate to spoil it. But I wouldn't want her to do anything foolish."

"Marriage isn't always foolish," I suggested. If he caught the emphasis, he ignored it.

"Never foolish, perhaps. But sometimes . . . ill-advised."

"Yes, sometimes. But who is to decide on the advising—ill or well?"

"Aren't you even going to try to stop it—or, at least, slow it up?" he persisted.

"No, I'm not, Dave. It got off ahead of me. Maybe the war does have a damned effect on women. I can't feel that it is any of my business."

"She is your daughter!"

"Ours," I corrected quickly.

"Well, do you want me to shy him off? Tell him we don't want it while the war's on? He seems very reasonable. And he wants to please us. Do you want me to see what I can do about it?"

"I don't want you to do anything, Dave, and I do not want you not to do anything you feel like doing. I think, as her father, you should do exactly what you think is just and wise. As her mother, that is what I intend to do."

"Meaning, exactly nothing."

"Exactly nothing," I repeated.

"Well, there must be something to the kid, I'll say that, to win the three of us over in such short order. I must say I am surprised at the Duchess."

Not surprised at me, of course! Anybody could win me over in short order!

We heard Gram in the hall and Dave called her in.

"We're talking about Ellena and Cliff," he said. "Do you think I should do something to stave off what appears to be imminent wedding bells?"

Gram was wide-eyed innocence. "Not if you really want to see the battle front," she said amusedly. "Your little glamour-puss is not without claws."

"Don't you think it would be a mistake to go ahead with it? Right now, I mean. Nothing against the boy. I like him. But right now, in the thick of the war . . ."

"I have never been able to lay my finger on any mistakes but my own," she said mildly. "And not on those until it was too late to do anything about them. I do not feel competent to judge."

"Do you think she's really serious about this? Permanently serious, I mean?"

"I have no idea," she said. "She's your daughter. You know her much better than I do."

"Yes, but you egged her on," he reminded her. "I suppose you

haven't entirely forgotten your adored Dean Fanshaw. Is it your idea just to let the thing ride?"

"I haven't any idea about it, one way or the other. She's bound to be in love with someone, she's so pretty and war is so sentimental. In my opinion, it might as well be Cliff, confined to camp two states away, as some desk colonel around town with nothing but women on his mind and a bar rail under his feet."

"I suppose so. I would hate to turn her against me right now."

He seemed slightly relieved.

Cliff could not get so much as a two-day pass. Ellena, in spite of being especially tender toward her father, was inclined to feel slightly resentful. After all, she argued hotly, what was the use of his being a general if he could not get so much as forty-eight hours for his future son-in-law, just long enough to get him safely married into the family. Dave agreed with her that it was a darned poor system, a lousy way to run an army, a weak administration all the way through. But there was nothing he could do about it.

He took his ten days. He put all his affairs in order, gave me due power of attorney, arranged with Gram for financing the Washington ménage, and went away again.

Gram was still a little frightened. Ellena, emotionally keyed up, was more inclined to tears than usual. But there was really nothing to worry about.

We had certainly anticipated that Dave would be given a desk job somewhere, or, at worst, assigned to a home training base. But though he was definitely going somewhere, we were not worried about his physical safety. He was a brigadier general and stars were never expendable. We thought it would be a desk job somewhere away from Washington—London, maybe. Anyhow, Dave wanted to go.

I think I wanted it, too. At least I wanted a postponement. I wanted distance and time. Perhaps he wanted the same thing.

It was several months later when Cliff phoned that he was getting a ten-day leave. This was in March. After OCS he had been sent

summarily to Texas. Ellena said it was the most summary war she ever heard of. And yet Washington was more crowded with uniforms than ever; hotels were jammed; buses packed, cocktail lounges virtually impenetrable. But, except for Washington, it was a summary war.

Cliff telephoned late in the evening. Gram and I, waiting up for the eleven o'clock radio news, listened casually. Suddenly we sensed that Ellena stiffened and came to attention. We could not see her and she was not speaking, but we sensed sudden rigid attentiveness.

After long seconds of listening she spoke breathlessly. "Cliff, you said ten days. Dad had ten days. It was his last leave. Is this your last leave?"

From odd, half-strangled, inarticulate sounds we gathered that he was trying to indicate mildly that such was indeed the case. Gram turned off the radio. We waited.

"Cliff, do you still consider our engagement strictly binding? Shall I make arrangements so we can be married as soon as you get here?"

There were more strangling sounds over the suffering wires, then long sentences, words jumbled together and stumbling over one another, unintelligible to us. We heard Ellena say, "Yes, darling. All right. Come as soon as you can."

She came into the room where we were waiting, motionless. "Cliff's going, too," she said briefly. "Ten days, like Dad. He's flying to Iowa to tell them good-bye and then coming here."

She ended with a flat period. We waited but she added nothing.

"That's nice," Gram said at last. "Eileen, you'll have to let Ellena move in with you so Cliff can have her room."

I nodded my head.

"No, not necessarily," Ellena said. "We'll have to be all set to get married as soon as he lands and then we'll go some place for a day or two. But we'll come back before the ten days is up, and then you'll just have to move out and switch with me, Mother, so we can have the married room."

I nodded my head again.

"It sounds a very silly arrangement to me," Gram said. "Why doesn't he come here first and you can go to Iowa together for the

honeymoon and then come back here to end up? There's no place you can go around here for a honeymoon. Unless you are in love with a regiment, like that girl in the song in the last war. Don't you want to go to Iowa with him?"

"No. In the first place he didn't ask me, and we aren't going to have our honeymoon until the war's over. We're just going to get married. But I'd rather have a regiment along the first few days than ordinary family, either his or mine. How long does it take to get married here? Will they accept his army medical papers as proof of purity? He's leaving for Iowa at 3:00 A.M. and will be here in three days, so we have to make things snappy."

"Ellena," I said timidly, "are you sure? Wouldn't you rather wait . . . a little while?"

She shook her head dizzily, as if hardly understanding my words.

"We'll go to New York," she said. "I'll call for a reservation right away. Thank heaven, they know us and will give us what choice there is. New York will be lovely to lose ourselves in for a few days. Nobody ever finds anybody in those milling millions. I'll wire Cliff in Iowa and tell him to come on a night plane and get here early in the morning to give us plenty of time to get ourselves married and off to New York. . . . Poor Dad! . . . But we'll take him with us on our honeymoon after the war."

She went back to the telephone, made emphatic reservation at the familiar old hotel in New York and sent Cliff a telegram in Iowa. Gram and I waited again, again in silence.

"Are you going to resign your position or take a week's leave?" Gram asked in a calm, unruffled voice.

"Neither. I'll just stay away. The chances are they will never notice I am gone. If they do I'll just say I spent a week down the wrong corridor. They'll probably dock me."

She sat down and looked at us.

"You do not seem very enthusiastic," she remarked.

"Neither do you," Gram said tartly. "In my opinion, it's a hell of a war and I wish it were over and done with. Your grandfather is lucky to be in China. I wish I were concentrated somewhere myself."

We laughed. "Concentrate on me, darling," Ellena said. "How

can I be inexpensively and hurriedly married without discrediting the family name?"

"We'll go to Pohick," Gram said. "I've always wanted somebody to be married there and this is the first chance I've had to put my foot down. Your father left you exclusively in my hands and no Pohick, no wedding."

"You've got your feet and hands all mixed up," Ellena said. "But it's all right with me. We'll meet him at the Field when he comes in and yank him off to Pohick. We can stop somewhere for a bit of nourishment and get back for the afternoon train to New York. I'll reserve chairs."

She went to the telephone and made the reservation, setting day and hour with complete confidence.

"Shall we invite anybody?" she asked, returning to us.

"No," we agreed simultaneously.

"If we invite anybody we have to invite everybody," Gram said. "Eileen and I can see that it is legally accomplished."

I could not sleep that night. I tossed for a couple of hours and then slipped softly across to Ellena's small room. The light was on, showing a faint streak under the door. I opened it. She was sitting up in bed, bright-eyed, surrounded with papers, checkbook, postal-savings card, war bonds and spot cash. She was figuring on a thick pad.

"I'm deciding how much I had better spend on clothes," she announced happily. "Sit down, Mother. I'll save the trousseau until he comes home when I will want to be looking very special. I'll get a nice suit and accessories, maybe a new dinner dress. Of course a new nightie and a negligee. I'll really splurge on those."

I sat down on the bed and looked at her searchingly. Her glad smile gave answer.

"Isn't it lovely, Mother? Almost as thrilling as with you and Dad. Except that you and Gram are chaperoning our elopement."

The plans went through without a hitch, save that Hortense pleaded so pathetically to see the wedding that we agreed to take her along with us to Pohick. Gram lent her money, an advance on her wages, to get a new dress for the occasion.

Hortense was responsible for the second hitch, too. The woman

who had agreed to keep the baby the day of the marriage failed to appear. Hortense, not to be cheated out of the treat, appeared with a little black baby in arms. Gram was disconcerted but Ellena took it cheerfully.

"It's a good omen," she said. "A little black wedding guest ought to be at least as lucky as standing next to color at a race track."

We met Cliff at the airport. Ellena had not notified him of the precise arrangements and he was pleasantly surprised that things had been so neatly expedited. Gram drove the car, and Hortense and the baby shared the front seat with her. Ellena, Cliff and I had the back seat.

It was a quiet drive. We were hushed and a little awed, I think. The baby slept quietly in his mother's arms. Cliff held both Ellena's hands and pressed them against his lips now and then. There was no effort at polite conversation.

The rector was waiting at the little white chapel and we all stood together before the low altar rail, with Hortense and the baby a little in the rear.

Then, very soon, we were driving back to Washington and Ellena was a married woman.

They went to New York on the afternoon train, still strictly according to plan. Gram and I waited. We had rapturous telegrams from them in New York and then they came back. They, too, were rapturous.

We had not heard from Dave since he left the country, but as he had a San Francisco APO we knew it was the Pacific area and many weeks would elapse before we had definite word.

Cliff had a New York APO, which indicated the European theater.

Ellena returned to the Pentagon. I went back to the hospital. And we three, Ellen, Eileen and Ellena, settled down to wait out the war.

IV. THE DUCHESS

1

I HAD not foreseen such swift and serious denouement when I collaborated so enthusiastically in Ellena's military romance. I fancy I reasoned, if I reasoned at all, that every nice girl was entitled to at least one blithe young love affair to help her endure the hardships and worries of war. I wanted Ellena to have all the happiness she could get. I had had plenty of time to think back and remember, and it was the happy times I thought most about and remembered most vividly. I wanted Ellena to have those memories, too. .

I never dreamed that the gay little romance would wind up with a whirlwind marriage. At least not until the war was over, and there wouldn't be much whirlwind about that.

All I intended was to lend a cloak of dignity to her adventure in love, thrilling but doubtless ephemeral. It was sheer good luck that the boy came from a college which had a dean of whom I had heard. If it had been some other college or some other dean, I should have thought up something else just as authentic. I approve of romance but I am a stickler for form, so I would have thought of something to strike the formal note. Romance, in my opinion, should be sanctified but not stifled by etiquette and I did my best.

I do not for a minute blame myself for the startling and rather terrifying result.

We were upset about things anyhow. I had already made up my mind to ask them all to live with me when Dave was switched to a desk job in Washington. At worst, we thought he would be put in charge of some big base at home with a nice promotion to add to his authority. In that case, his wife and daughter would move to the base with him and I would visit them, if it was pleasantly located as to climate.

But no! Dave was off to the South Pacific. Ellena was married and Cliff was headed east. And there we were.

We got along very well. I had always made a point of getting along well with everybody, even maids. Eileen was persistently agreeable and Ellena, though tempestuous, was sweet and considerate. Some of our friends, where parents had descended upon children, or parents and children had descended upon grandparents, were having no end of unpleasant experiences. Rows, ruptures, ructions. We had nothing like that.

Ellena and Eileen did their work, I did mine. In addition we all did our share of soliciting funds, selling bonds, rolling bandages, patrolling the block in blackouts and studying up on civilian defense.

There was more housework. Hortense's war baby was a great inconvenience, interfering with her hours, detaining her so she was nearly always late and sometimes failed to appear at all. When she came, she was a little distraught, wondering if her friends were doing things right at home; sometimes she was tired from an all-night vigil; and she was apt to sneak off early, leaving soiled pans carefully shoved to the back of the oven.

But we got along all right.

They took the war oddly, I thought, Eileen and Ellena. For my part, I considered it one of those ghastly things that had to be endured and with as little grousing as possible. Ellena, because of Cliff and Dave, regarded it as a Great Crusade and was as tender about uniforms as if they were shining armor. All one had to do, in order to enlist her passionate support, was to say "for the war effort." The war effort to Ellena was Cliff and Dave.

Eileen, though she worked, and did all that was asked of her, ignored the war as much as she could. She would not discuss it. She would not listen to the radio broadcasts. She worked but she did it passively; her heart was not in it.

A good many months had passed and letters were coming and going with comparative regularity, when I first began watching Eileen. I can not recall what prompted my watchfulness. Perhaps it was because Ellena seemed a little withdrawn, quieter, less free and easy. There had been no words, no quarrel of any kind. But sometimes she looked at her mother covertly, under lowered lids, as if she were observing something not obvious.

Anyhow I began watching Eileen. I was pleased. There was a change in her and I considered it a change for the better. She was brighter, more alert, more interested and more interesting. She had always been rather the passive type. In moments of irritation with her, I had considered her downright bovine.

"A bovine child born to her father and me!" I used to think impatiently.

She was taking infinite pains with her appearance, her clothes, her hair. I approved of that. She couldn't afford to let herself go just because her husband was halfway round the world. I had always been fastidious but never so much so as since I was left alone. So I was gratified that Eileen had risen to the emergency and was not only holding herself to the mark but was surpassing it.

There was something else, too. Something apart from clothes and complexion. There was a fresh lilt to her voice, a new sparkle in her eyes, a soft sensitiveness of her lips which smiled more easily and more often than before.

I watched her approvingly for a good many days before I realized that her reaction to her husband's absence, while commendable, was odd to say the least. Not quite natural.

As soon as suspicion stirred in me, I went to work on it.

"It is odd," I thought. "It's darned odd. And it isn't the war she cares about. It's herself."

Suspicion is a sly devil. Once brought to life he wastes no time presenting confirmation, or what seems to be confirmation. In this case, there was no seeming about it. It was clear and unmistakable.

Eileen was called to the telephone. Not more than two words were spoken when her voice went off into a pleased little ripple of laughter.

"Yes, of course, Van . . . Yes, of course . . . I'll love it. Bye, now."

Van. It was Bob Vandermere. If I hadn't been so preoccupied with other things I'd have recognized the symptoms weeks ago.

Eileen had come in late one afternoon. "Guess whom I met today," she said chattily. "Bob Vandermere! You remember Bob and Edith Vandermere, don't you? We used to see a lot of them before they moved west. He is here now, with Intelligence. We met on the bus, of all places, literally standing on each other's feet. He started

to apologize and then when he saw it was I he dropped the apology and hugged out what little breath there was left in me. We stopped at the Shoreham for a cocktail."

"That's nice," I said. "How is Edith?"

"She's dead, Mother, don't you remember? It was several years ago and we've been so out of touch it was on the tip of my tongue to ask about her, but instinct prodded me just in time. He asked me to go to dinner and a show tomorrow night. Anybody see any objections? Voice them now or forever hold your peace."

We saw no objections. We had none of those old-fashioned ideas that a married woman mustn't have tea with an old friend or that a husband can't buy his wife's friend a sandwich and a coke if he wants to. Casually, of course, just casually, in a nice, friendly way. So we saw no objections. We thought it was very nice.

We had seen a good deal of Van since that day. He had many friends in Washington, officers and government men, mostly married couples, and Eileen fitted into their social groove as snugly as ball bearings. Nothing elaborate was going on but it was a nice, congenial crowd. They dined together, danced, played bridge, and I was delighted that Eileen was having a good time. My own friends were more important—more interesting, too—but they were older. She had always been agreeable about making a fourth for bridge when we were short a hand and helping with tea and refreshments, but, after all, we were an older crowd.

So I was pleased until my attention was attracted by the narrowed brightness of Ellena's eyes, glancing slantwise at her mother.

I thought about it a good deal for a few days. I couldn't see there was anything in it to worry about. It was obvious that she was enjoying a belated flirtation and in my heart of hearts I thought it was a good thing. When a woman gets to be around forty and is feeling herself dated and passé it helps her morale to discover that she is still attractive and can win men and influence heartthrobs. I honestly thought it would do her good. And Dave, knowing as he did how completely dependable and unchanging she was, could not possibly object and would be rather pleased than otherwise. He always wanted her to enjoy herself.

"Ellena is a prude," I thought leniently. "Youth is so deadly dog-

matic about everybody older than itself. Especially if it happens to be a parent."

I might have taken it a little more to heart except that my heart was terribly taken up right then with Ellena. Ellena was finding it pretty rough sledding, this long-range marriage of hers. I hadn't really worried about her swift marriage. We all liked Cliff, even Dave, and that was a sound recommendation. After all, her marriage had not been so expeditious as Eileen's, and frankly I felt that Ellena could do a better job of selecting a husband than her mother. Though, by the sheer kindness of Providence, Dave had turned out very well.

Eileen had always been easily led and had accepted the friends that circumstances and environment brought her way. As I saw it she had done much the same thing in her elopement and many a time I thanked God, on my knees, that she had done so well. I had a good deal more confidence in Ellena's judgment.

Ellena's attitude in the beginning, toward the war and toward her marriage, had been genuinely noble. Beautiful. It had been an inspiration to me.

All out for the war effort, hurry it along, get it over. All out, too, for her young husband, to be ready for him and their future life together. I used to watch for her coming home, when she stepped off the bus and turned down the Place. I liked the way she walked, with such lithe and eager confidence, pretty head held high. When she got to the forsythia bushes that bordered our place, she broke impulsively into a little, eager run. That was for the mail. If there were letters from Cliff, I had the door open, the mail in my hand, ready for her. If there was none from him—"Nothing worth running for today," I called warningly. "Nothing but checks and bills and scandal-mongering."

"I was in a hurry anyway," she would declare brightly. "I can't expect letters every mail. After all, there are some other soldiers who want their chance at the mail bags."

With all her other work, she was also busy accumulating what she called a trousseau collection. She would not call it a hope chest, because her hopes had already become reality. She worked faithfully on her collection. Every evening after dinner she went to the desk

in the den off the dining room and wrote to Cliff. I often made errands to pass through the kitchen, just to see her sitting there, her eyes starry, her face luminous, her lips soft with tenderness.

Noble about it. Noble and beautiful. I was proud she was Eileen's daughter, my grandchild. I felt so strongly about it I actually wished her grandfather could see it too, how lovely and tender and brave she was.

The summer passed and winter came again. She had quit running those last few steps to get the mail. Often she stood on the porch, chatting with the next-door children. When I shoved the mail at her, frequently she put it down somewhere unopened and did other things for a while. Sometimes she neglected to take it when she went upstairs.

She had packed away her trousseau collection and did no more work on it and many nights passed when she did not go near the desk in the den. She was receiving fewer letters from Cliff, too, fewer and far skimpier. No more voluminous air-mail specials, either coming or going; just the brief and crowded V page. She seemed to be having a good enough time, going out with the girls to movies, teas and bridge, but the delirious warmth in her eyes had cooled.

"You haven't written to Cliff for quite a while, have you?" I finally ventured to ask, contrary to my usual policy of strictly-hands-off.

"Oh, not so long ago. Sometime last week, I think," she said carelessly.

"Won't he feel cheated when the mails come in?" I persisted.

"Oh, he probably gets plenty of letters from . . . people he knows better," she said irritably. "There's nothing to write about. If you come across any amusing cartoons or squibs, for heaven's sake clip them for me. Anything to fill up an envelope."

"I never knew you to be pinched for words," I said, trying to speak casually though my heart was pounding in my throat.

"Oh, I still have plenty of words. I just haven't any news to clothe them with." She went on, more hurriedly, "It's just that . . . we don't know much about each other, Gram. We're really strangers. He doesn't know anybody I know, and I don't even know

what he's interested in—except engineering, and I can't write with much ardor about that. I don't know whether he likes sports or music or art. I don't even know which is his favorite comic! I can't tell whether he is interested in what I write or not."

"Are you interested in what he writes you?" I asked.

"Why, of course!" This quite indignantly. Then, more honestly: "He doesn't write much either, Gram, so don't worry about it. He doesn't know me a bit better than I know him. He tells me anecdotes about the war. The papers are full of anecdotes about the war."

"You seemed to have plenty to say at first," I reminded her.

"Yes. At first," she repeated dryly. "But you can't go on sending love and kisses interminably. Even love and kisses deteriorate in V-mail."

She got up then and went quickly upstairs.

I was sorry about this. I realized the truth of what she said. They had never had time to build up common interests, and their contacts had consisted of gazing into love-lit eyes and kissing love-warmed lips. They hadn't wanted anything else. But they had been in love, I was sure of that. They would be in love again as soon as they got together. From the bottom of my heart I cursed the war and wished it would get over before my family went to pieces, not only before my eyes but under my own roof.

And what's more, the Pimpernel would find a way to blame me for most of it. I was sure of that.

2

I did the best I could. I began writing to Cliff myself. I tried to make the letters gay and at the same time present Ellena in a pleasanter light than she was actually revealing at the moment. I pictured our manless estate in its most amusing aspect and it was not easy. For it did not amuse me at all. Say what you like, in troubled and uncertain times there is a kind of solid comfort in having a man around the house, even if he does no more than remind you it was all your fault in the first place and nothing to lose any sleep over anyhow.

I was losing sleep over it. Sleep and appetite. My face aged ten years in those months. Ellena was thin, too, and pale and listless. Eileen was blooming. She was almost beautiful. I resented that. I reminded myself that women around her age often have a brief recurrence of girlish freshness, the way so many take on new charm when they are going to have a baby. At the same time, it seemed a sly aspersion on Ellena and me that we were wan and drawn and dragged-out and only Eileen should shine with beauty.

On one of those ghastly warm early-spring nights when I could not sleep, I went out to the chaise longue on the upper veranda. It was stifling there, too, and I had no expectation of getting any sleep. But I must have dozed off lightly for voices startled me to wakefulness, voices drifting up from below, vaguely at first and indistinguishable. Then I heard clearly:

"Darling! Kiss me again!"

"Thank God I am getting old," I thought drowsily. "Fancy having to kiss and be kissed on a night like this."

There were murmurous sounds from below and a few half-smothered words. Then I was brought to wide-awake attentiveness. Eileen's voice:

"Van, how I love you! How I love you!"

Van mumbled something, unintelligible to me.

"No, no, Van, I can't. I want to but I can't. Not till Dave gets home. I'll do it then, I'll tell him the minute he lands. But it would be too utterly heartless—when he's over there, getting so much hell."

"But he won't object, darling, you know he won't object."

"Oh, I know that. He's as fed up as I am. But he couldn't quite . . . well, respect me . . . if I did such a thing while he is gone. I don't want him not to . . . respect me. It would look cowardly to do it while he's away. I am never going to be cowardly about anything any more. I am going to be like Gram and Ellena from this on."

I shut my eyes, hard. I tried to shut my ears.

There was a good deal of silence, a few low murmurs, faint sounds. Occasionally, though I tried not to listen, I was forced to overhear.

"Oh, yes, Van. I'm sure. I never was in love before, I know that. I was a fool. But it's nothing against Dave. He's all right—in his own way. I'll tell him the minute he gets home."

And again: "No, no, really, Van. I shall wait and tell him to his face. I want him to know I have quit being a coward. Divorces don't take long. We can wait, it won't be too hard, because we are waiting together."

He went away at last and I hurried into my room and got into bed. Another sleepless night.

Eileen! Eileen, of all people in the world! And I had considered her passive, almost bovine. There was nothing bovine about her that night. She sounded like smouldering fire in the heart of a volcano.

I reminded myself of her treacherous age, the unpredictable early forties. I assured myself that when Dave came marching home he would toss away the whole ludicrous escapade with a careless snap of his fingers.

But it looked like a long-drawn-out war. He might not be marching home in time.

I was acutely sorry we hadn't a man around the house that night. It would have been worth shouldering the blame.

I was sick at heart. I realized as Eileen and Ellena could not how very frightfully easy it is to drift along to a divorce and how shockingly foolish it usually is. They had been most considerate. They had asked no questions. I had volunteered no information. But I was ashamed of that divorce to the bottom of my heart. And there was no reason for it.

Nerves, that's all. Ill temper. False pride. Stubbornness.

Like everybody else in that seething period just before and after Pearl Harbor, we were keyed up, impatient, easily irritated. On each other's nerves. It had happened before. It happens in most families. When anybody tells me there has never been a cross word or a burst of temper in a long married life, I am pretty sure that at least one of the couple is a downright fool and probably both are liars.

But that time we couldn't seem to snap out of it. When he said what we needed was a good, quick, iron-clad divorce, I angrily

agreed with him. I thought so, too. And started after it the next day. If I had waited a week it would have blown off into thin air. But I made up my mind to teach him a good lesson for once and make him come crawling back on his knees.

I left Washington the next day. And he did not come. At any time if he had wired or phoned or written and told me not to be a damn fool but to come back home and sort out the laundry and water the petunias, I would have gone. But he did not write or phone or wire. I almost began to believe that perhaps he actually did want a divorce, incredible though it seemed. I confidently expected him to tear up the papers when he received them. But he didn't. He signed them. Then he went to South America.

So I knew from experience just how easy it is to begin making a fool of yourself and keep on because you are too stubborn to quit. I loved Eileen and Ellena. I didn't want them to make that mistake. One fool in the family was plenty. But even then I could not break down and make an honest confession. I knew they already suspected it was more than half my fault but I couldn't bring myself to admit it.

The days dragged. Marking time. Van always underfoot, Eileen looking radiant and happy. Ellena paler and colder and a little bitter, neither she nor Cliff doing anything to clutter up the mail traffic between us and the European theater. I, sick at heart, knowing just where we were headed, not knowing how to throw the switch. It was hellish.

V. ELLENA

1

MARCH 1944. Our wedding anniversary. I had been a married woman for a year. But I did not feel like a married woman. I felt like a silly fool of a schoolgirl who had let war hysteria or emotion tangle her all up in a web that was not comfortable to live in, and hard to get out of. Movie stuff. Innocent young girl misled by dreams of romance. Not wisely but too well. That sort of thing.

I didn't really blame Cliff. I just tried not to think of him at all. When I looked at his picture I was stunned with wonderment as to what it was that had swept me off my feet. Washington was full of handsomer men than Cliff. But I didn't want them. I didn't want any man at all. I thought the Duchess had been very smart to toss His Excellency into the discard. Mother was just darned lucky to have drawn a trump like Dad. Of course she was flirting her head off with Van but most of the dowagers in Washington were passing their time away like that and in that woman-ridden town she was lucky to have as nice a squire as Van.

But not for me. No man.

I felt terribly married the first few months. Completely, entirely, enthusiastically married. I don't know when it began wearing off. I don't know why. It was nothing Cliff said. But it was mutual. I sensed that gradually.

It just hadn't been love. That's all. I had read enough, seen enough movies, to know what it was. Sex appeal, pure and simple. I used sometimes to go hot with shame, remembering how I had been deceived—or deceived myself—by such a common, transient, paltry substitute for the deep love and devotion the real me really wanted. Like Mother and Dad.

I hardly ever knew where Cliff was at the time he was there. His brief, infrequent letters seemed timed particularly to fit his departures and often there were long lapses in our correspondence. He

was in North Africa first and was stepped up to a First Lieutenancy. We had expected that because of his engineering background. He was in Sicily and then in England. He was at Normandy and Belgium. I had vaguely felt that the Engineers were rather a safe branch of the service but it seems I was in error for they took some awful beatings. From a hospital in England he reported tersely that he had been wounded in Belgium but was coming along all right and might presently be rating a sick leave.

I was sorry he was sick and wounded but it was a broad, impersonal sorrow, the same sort of half-nauseating anguish we felt over the casualty lists, the missing, the wounded, the captured, the killed. Cliff was now a casualty.

I was conscientious though. I wrote oftener and at greater length though I still had nothing to write about. I sent him things to eat and books and clippings. Magazines and newspapers were life-savers. I spent hours culling them for diversity of material, not knowing what subjects interested him particularly. I copied down wisecracks from radio broadcasts. And I wrote everything I could think of, about Gram and Mother mostly, and what we were hearing from Dad, still in the Pacific area. I even gave quotes from His Excellency's letters. His Excellency had got himself back into North Africa and was enjoying the war from Cairo, of all places.

Cliff's sickness made it easier for him. He could just say he was not well enough to write much but was getting along fine; had received the things I sent and thanks very much. He reported that he was going to live but possibly not to fight another day. "I suppose I should have run away," he remarked with exclamation point.

It was mid-summer when he telephoned from New York. He was at Halloran Hospital, feeling fine thanks. My heart seemed to sink right through the soles of my rationed shoes clear down to the basement but I pulled myself together and offered to go up to see him.

"Oh, no," he said, with something like enthusiasm, "no use to do that. I shall only be here long enough for them to make up their minds how much of a casualty I am. Then I'll be sent somewhere else for a while, I suppose, but I am sure to have a sick leave soon. Maybe a medical discharge."

I felt more sympathetic when I knew I wouldn't have to see him for a while. I offered to send him anything his heart desired and gave him love and kisses from Gram and Mother and reminded him to be sure to keep in touch with us.

He did, a week later. He had been transferred to Atlantic City and the board was checking on him. He was due for an extended leave. It was a careful letter. I dare say he had rewritten it a dozen times to express just the shade of his intent.

"I am still pretty well shot up and very weak. Would it be better for me to go right through to Iowa first and get a little rested up before I come to Washington? Or I can come there a few days first if you prefer. I understand that Washington is still a hot spot of congestion. Will you be able to get me a hotel reservation for a few days? I can't get around much. Perhaps it would be better for me to go home first and see you when I am a little firmer on the pins."

I handed Gram the letter without a word. She read it slowly and passed it along to Mother.

"He will come here, of course," Gram said at last, when I remained silent. "Here to the house, I mean. We have plenty of room. . . . Eileen, you won't mind taking the little room while he is here, will you? He and Ellena can take yours."

Mother said she would not mind.

I wrote and told him, wrote as carefully as he had written. He replied that he would come if we were sure we wanted it that way; he didn't want to be too much of a burden and at present had to spend most of his time quietly resting in bed.

"Wouldn't it be better for him to go to Iowa first?" I suggested hopefully. "He can rest up with his own family and come on here for a while when he is strong enough to wield a knife and fork."

Gram and Mother would not hear of that. They were gentle but indomitable.

I was terribly sorry he was sick and had been wounded. I was sorry about all the sick and wounded soldiers. But I couldn't make myself feel that his condition was more personal to me than that of the Army in general. He was no more like a husband, my husband,

belonging and returning to me, than the rest of them. I was frightened but I was angry, too.

They should have known, Mother and Gram and Dad, that Cliff and I were strangers. They must have realized it. They should never have allowed us to be such fools. Cliff himself should have known better.

I tried desperately to think back and remember how thrilling and how ecstatic it had been, those few hours we had together. But I was too cold and too frightened and too resentful to re-experience anything that had once seemed sweet and was now a nightmare.

When word arrived that he was coming, specifying day and hour, we worked hard. Mother and I changed rooms. Gram shopped for the best food our rations and the markets afforded. We had flowers, candy, cigarettes and wines. And magazines. Plenty of magazines and plenty of books. I was going to see that he had lots of time for reading, or at least looking at pictures.

We had been scrupulously saving our coupons to have a little gas on hand during his visit, so I got the car out to meet him at the station. Gram and Mother offered uneasily to go with me but I did not want them. I knew it was a thing I had to face alone. Besides, I did not want them to witness what could not be overlooked.

I dressed painstakingly. Gram thought I was a little pale and touched up my make-up. Her fingers were cold on my face.

She and Mother followed me to the door.

"Can't I go and drive, Ellena, so you can sit with Cliff?"

"He may need a little help, you know," Gram added.

I shook my head.

I drove slowly, schooling myself. I must look just so, say just such things in just such a tone of voice. The government had printed reams of advice on the right kind of welcome-home. I mustn't hurt him, not right away anyhow; I mustn't be surprised or shocked at his appearance; I must be pleased but not gushy. I had read columns about it and considered it so much tripe. No returning man wanted his woman to meet him by army regulations. He wanted his woman to meet him—well, like his woman. But I wasn't Cliff's woman. That was the rub.

So I tried to remember the regulations. Perhaps there were a lot

of young wives, like me, not really married to their soldiers. Perhaps it was for us the regulations had been drawn up.

I got to the station early and found a parking place. I walked in slowly and looked at the train schedule. His train was only twenty minutes late. I read the numbers carefully, not to make a mistake, for my eyes were smarting and the printing blurred. I went to the Ladies' Room and freshened my make-up. I tried to smile into the mirror. The effect was grotesque. I decided I'd better look sad and wistful. I tried that and it came easier. I went out and walked up and down the platform, very lonely in the milling crowd.

A Red Cross woman was standing near the entrance with a wheel chair, empty. I wished wickedly, and I hope God forgives me, that I were meeting Cliff with a wheel chair. Wheeling a chair would give me something to do with my hands, which felt numb and conspicuous.

The crowd clustered at the gates as the train came in. The Red Cross woman went through with the wheel chair. Three or four WACs were admitted and a Navy nurse. The rest of us waited. The station was quiet now.

I stood a little way back, behind the crowd. The passengers came surging through. There were eager words and laughter; there were close embraces, a few half-stifled sobs. A good many soldiers came, some limping. The Navy nurse was guiding one with eyes tightly bandaged.

I waited without moving until all had come through the gates. I stepped back and looked wonderingly around me. I asked the guard if that was the train from Atlantic City, and he said it was. I asked if it were coming in two sections, and he assured me this was the entire train.

I went back to the waiting room and looked around. I could hardly remember how he looked. I had considered him extremely handsome but there was no vivid remembrance of his features. He might have been any of those soldiers who had passed me. If he already had his medical discharge, he might have been one of the civilians. I had another look at the train schedule.

There was a light touch on my arm. I turned quickly. It was the Red Cross woman. She was smiling.

"Are you Mrs. Lindley?" she asked.

"No, I'm . . . Yes, yes, of course, I am Mrs. Lindley," I said nervously.

"The Captain thought he recognized your back. He is over by the window in a wheel chair. Don't be frightened, my dear; he isn't lame. But he is still very weak, so they wired us to meet him. The congestion is so frightful in Washington they were afraid of a mix-up and wanted to make it easy for him."

She chatted encouragingly as we walked toward the wheel chair. . . . So he was a captain now. He hadn't bothered to tell me about that. He looked gaunt and haggard. A rush of pity welled into my heart—the rush of pity that comes to us who were kept safe and well when we see those coming back who were never safe and perhaps will never be well again. He was wearing the Purple Heart. He hadn't mentioned that either, but I had known he was wounded.

He got out of the chair and came to meet us.

He said, "Hello, Ellena."

We shook hands. Feeling the sober eyes of the Red Cross woman upon me, I put my arms about his shoulders and kissed him. His lips were cold. Any slight warmth in his might have softened the chill in my own.

"I had to park quite a little way off," I said hurriedly. "The place was jammed. Can you walk so far?"

"That's the reason for the chair," the Red Cross woman said cheerfully. "Sit down, Captain. We'll wait at the entrance for you, Mrs. Lindley. You can pull right up to the door. They will honor my pass if not the chair."

We moved toward the entrance, she pushing the chair, I walking beside Cliff, glancing down at him, trying to remember how he used to look. I was married to him. In the eyes of the law I was his wife. But he did not look at all as I had expected.

"They wanted to come, too," I said nervously, "Mother and Gram. But I wouldn't let them. I wanted the first look at you myself."

"No vision of beauty," he said gruffly.

"You look all right," I said staunchly. "It was considerate of them to put your scars where they do not show."

He waited in the chair while I fetched the car.

"Can you manage all right, Mrs. Lindley?" the woman asked, as he got carefully into the front seat beside me while she put his bags in the rear. "Would you like me to come along and see that he is officially delivered? I shall be very glad to."

"Oh no, no thanks," I said. "I can manage nicely." I was anxious to get beyond range of her quiet, questioning eyes. I realized that I had fallen far below the standard of government regulations. "If you think he will be all right," I finished lamely.

"Oh, he's all right. He's almost as good as new. He just needs a fresh winding-up for a new start. Good luck, Captain. Good-by, Mrs. Lindley."

I drove off, slowly.

"Do you have any pain, Cliff?" I asked. "Does driving hurt you?"

"No, not at all. Just damned weak. Damned weak and damned irritable. Your grandmother will be pretty much burned up, seeing me dawdle around underfoot, no good to anybody. I'll get along out west as soon as I can."

"She's looking forward to having you," I said politely. "She adores having people to kick around as long as they can't kick back. Do you expect to be let out of the Army?"

"It's what I expect. Good riddance both ways." His voice was bitter. "Did you take the day off from your work?"

"I took a vacation. They were very nice about it. They said a returning soldier was much more important than a common Christmas."

"To whom?" he asked wryly.

I turned down Twenty-eighth Place and pulled up to the curb. Gram and Mother appeared on the porch almost by magic and came down the walk to meet us. They kissed Cliff and bustled solicitously around him. I carried his bag. He smiled at Gram.

"Heard from Dean Fanshaw lately?" he asked, more pleasantly than he had yet spoken.

"If he is still deaning, I consider him a slacker and he is off my corresponding list," she said cheerfully.

He sat down in the chair nearest the door in the living room but Mother shook her head at him reprovingly. "You forget that you

are now in the hands of two veteran nurse's aides," she said briskly. "Upstairs with you, my lad, and pronto. Into your pajamas and into your bed! Right, Colonel?" She appealed to Gram.

"Right, Corporal," Gram approved.

We all moved upstairs and down the hall.

"My favorite chore," Mother said cheerfully, "is unpacking the incomers' bags. So much tidier than a lot of other details I could mention. I know just where to put everything and what you shall not be requiring for a day or two."

She swung his bag onto the small trunk rack and opened it. She tossed him his pajamas and slippers and pointed to the bathroom across the hall. Gram turned back the covers of one of the twin beds and fluffed up the pillows. I noticed that she had brought the best down pillows from her own room. I stood in the center of the room and watched them.

Cliff came back and stretched out on the bed, stiffly, without relaxation.

"You'll have to do the running up and down stairs, Ellena," Gram said, "because you have the youngest legs and are proud of it. How about a shot of brandy all round?"

I went at once. I took my time about it. I put away my wraps and gloves. I rubbed up the tray and polished the small glasses. Gram and Mother were being wonderful and I appreciated it.

"But they should be wonderful," I thought resentfully. "It's their fault. They should have stopped me. Heaven knows they were old enough to know better."

I tried to think of more things they could do, things that would keep them in the room with us. I couldn't bear the thought of being left alone with him. I dawdled around as long as I decently could and then went up with the tray. My spirits rose a little when I entered the room. They had drawn chairs up near the bed and were sitting there, quietly talking. I must say he looked as relieved as I felt.

I served the brandy and we exhausted the two safe subjects of Dad and the weather. Finally they got up and moved around, doing small things, but they left the door open and called remarks back from one room to another. They drifted in and out, asking questions, bringing things.

Not a word had been said among us—us three, I mean. But either they were particularly clever or women have a natural sixth or seventh sense about such delicate matters, for they knew we did not want to be alone. I couldn't help remembering how different it had been those other times when he was there. They had known then, too—known that we wanted to be alone and made all sorts of excuses to give us the privilege—and we did not demur. So now they did not leave us, instead made excuses to keep popping in on us, and again we did not demur. We thanked God and we thanked them.

It was tough for both of us and, because they loved us, it was tough for them, too. Most of the time Cliff lay quietly on his bed, usually pretending to be asleep. I encouraged that pretense. After the first day he came downstairs in the midafternoon and walked in the garden or went for a short drive and stayed down for an early dinner. I was passionately helpful with the housework, especially downstairs, away from him. I washed and polished dishes with such repetitive fervor that even I felt some concern for the floral patterns and monograms.

At ten in the evening, after he had gone back to bed, we all went up to his room with eggnog or milk shakes. Gram and Mother told him good night and I took the tray and glasses downstairs and washed them lovingly. By the time I got back he was apparently sleeping. I lowered the lights, took my things into the bathroom and spent much more time getting myself ready to retire than I did for any daytime appearance.

On the fourth evening after dinner when we were sitting in the living room he said suddenly, in his crisp new way of speaking that was more unfamiliar than anything else about him, "You have all most considerably refrained from asking my plans but I am afraid you really have to know."

Mother and I hesitated. It was on that challenging sort of thing that Gram was at her best.

"Cliff," she said coolly, "if you have a plan as early as this, you are either a superman or a demigod, and personally I think both are despicable. So I hope for my aging peace of mind that you are a

mere average human, marking time and waiting to see what comes next."

He laughed a little. She was the only one who could get any kind of a laugh out of him. "My plans are not sufficiently formulated to rank me either super or demi," he said. "But at least I can assure you that I am not going to park on you in perpetuity. I shall go home soon and see what if anything is afoot in my own parts."

"Cliff," Gram said, "you haven't forgotten that you had a wedding a while ago, have you? You left rather hurriedly, as many grooms do, but we haven't forgotten that it happened. We decided to postpone wedding presents until you got back because Ellena thought you would enjoy receiving them together. But you rate a wedding present from me and I know what I want to give you."

She was a slick one. I have to hand it to her.

He looked at her diffidently. That was better than the way he usually looked at me, which, if he looked at all, was definitely askance. He spoke rather humbly, a marked change, for most of the time he was aggressively on the defensive.

"If it's all right with Ellena, I think wedding presents are expendable until . . . until things are a little more settled and we know what we are going to do."

"Mine isn't that kind of a present," Gram said. "I know your mother can hardly wait to see you, and Ellena is anxious to meet her. We are all anxious to meet her. So I want my wedding present to be a round-trip ticket for her to come here and make us all a nice long visit."

That caught him off guard. He did not look at anybody. "You haven't much extra room, have you?" he said feebly.

"We've plenty of room," she declared indignantly. "You've never been up to the third floor, have you? We have three rooms up there and another bath. We aren't using that floor right now but we have plenty of room."

This was more than an exaggeration. It was an outright lie. There was a maid's room and bath, it is true, and there was another half-finished room that was piled to the ceiling with stored things—boxes, furniture, trunks. The rest of the floor was bare, unfinished

attic. Mother and I said nothing. We had always known she took liberties with the truth. We were accustomed to let her talk herself out of small ensuing jams.

Cliff was silent awhile. It was strictly between him and Gram, so Mother and I waited.

"That's very swell of you, Duchess," he said, with a twisted smile. "I will tell Mother. It will please her but she cannot come."

"Why can't she come?" Gram asked belligerently. "The round-trip ticket is all the wedding present you are going to get out of me and if she doesn't come I'll save money on you."

He really smiled then and his eyes, though still dark, lost some of their ugly hardness. It was only at her that he smiled.

"It isn't the ticket I am thanking you for," he said. "It's the nice thought behind the invitation. It's swell of you. And Mother would like to come in ordinary circumstances. But she can't. She has to stay there with . . . with my kid brother. He got his eyes knocked out in his first engagement. He is at home with her now. He is blind. He's only nineteen."

I think I really hated him when he said that. I wasn't pretending to be his wife, I didn't expect to be treated like a wife, but we were married. His own kid brother and he had never told me! I felt the eyes of Gram and Mother turning swiftly on me, moving swiftly away. I did not say a word. Let them think whatever they wanted to think. Only nineteen and blind! Blind for the rest of his life. Bobby. That was his name. I remembered it now. Bobby was blind.

Gram was shocked but it was hard to stump her. She rallied slowly. "Would he be able to come too, Cliff? I'll expand the present to include him. We could make things very easy for him. Even if he can't see, the change, new voices, new environment, new talk—it might all work together to buck him up. It would help him to be with you and he could help you, too. We'd love to have him. There's plenty of room."

"I don't think so, thank you," Cliff said. His voice was gentle but very weary. "Bob could probably make it and I dare say it would be an interesting change, but, you see, my sister is there, too. With her two little children. Her husband was killed six months ago. It's all rather a mess. But I know Mother. She wouldn't leave them."

His sister. Her name was Hildegarde. They called her Gardy. Her husband's name—I could not remember his name; Cliff called him Skinny. The babies were Betsy and Bill. I didn't know Skinny was dead. It showed more clearly than anything else what a perfect farce our marriage was.

"Cliff," Gram said gently after a painful pause, "let me get this straight. You really are not the most loquacious person in the world! Your mother is a widow, isn't she? Your young brother is at home and blind. Your sister's husband is dead and she is there with her orphaned babies. Is that right?"

"Wrapping it up in a bombshell, that is right," he said harshly. "Pretty little picture, isn't it?"

Gram stood up, slim and short, but entirely royal. "Then, Cliff, take this from me!" she said. "You are not going home until you have put a little complexion on your face and at least thirty pounds under your belt. You are not going home until you can get a ring in your voice and a grin on your lips and show the world that you are man enough for any troubled household. You are not going until you are ready to go, if I have to . . . hog-tie you!"

He laughed drearily. "Oh, I can buck up to it if I have to," he said.

"You couldn't buck up to a termite, the way you feel!" Gram said derisively. "Go and fix him an eggnog, Ellena. He'll never fatten up on cigarettes!"

2

That conversation put him and Gram back on terms of cheerful camaraderie. Mother remained as before, carefully but pleasantly neutral. It did absolutely nothing for me. I think it made things worse. Before, I had been frightened and aloof and chilly. Now was added hot resentment. He should never have come to our house at all; he should have gone to his own home and his own people. Instead of writing me what the top soak had said to the Pfc he could have told me about Bobby. Instead of burbling along about the weather and the rations, he might have mentioned Gardy and the babies. I went on doing the things I had been doing but I never

spoke to him at all except out of strict necessity or out of politeness, answering when spoken to.

It was the seventh night. I took an unconscionably long time over the eggnog glasses in the kitchen. I tuned in a news broadcast. I did everything I could think of in the bathroom, scrubbed soap dishes, washed mirrors, polished towel rods. It required a tremendous effort finally to force myself to cross the corridor and open the door to that room. His room.

I stepped inside and stopped short. A feeling of absolute rage swept over me. I had never before had such a feeling. There was hatred in it and fury and murder—or something like murder. I wished he was dead. If he had spoken I think I could have killed him. I hated him wildly. The feeling frightened me.

I went out quickly and closed the door behind me. Mother was reading in the little room, her door ajar. I pushed it open and beckoned to her fiercely. She got up at once. I went to Gram's room and knocked sharply. She sat up in bed and switched on the lights. I did not speak. I motioned with my hand for her to come downstairs and then I ran down, ran fast, clear to the kitchen without stopping. She and Mother followed quickly, in complete silence.

In the kitchen I squared off by myself and faced them, wildly. "Listen to me," I said. My voice was low and harsh. "Listen! He's got to go! You've got to let him go! I can't stand it any more. I'll kill him. . . . Listen, both of you! I want you to get this straight!"

Gram sighed wearily. "I hate getting things straight, especially in the middle of the night. There's never anything pleasant about things you have to get straight. . . . You'd better sit down, Eileen."

She and Mother pulled straight chairs away from the small kitchen table and sat down. Their calmness, their casualness, even their incongruous appearance, ready for bed, in dressing gowns and slippers, had a hushing effect on the turmoil inside me.

"He wants to go home," I explained. "You know he wants to. Just let him go. Let him go as quickly as possible. . . . Oh, you can be nice about it, be polite, be hellishly polite if you want to—and I suppose you do. But let him go!"

"Do you mean you are going with him, Ellena?" Gram asked, in

that rhetorically suave way of hers, knowing the answer but determined to put me on the spot.

"I do not mean any such thing. I have not been asked to go and I wouldn't go if I were asked. All I want is to get rid of him. I am not blaming anybody but myself for the mess I am in but I am all through. I want him to get as far away as he can and just as quickly as possible and if either of you does anything to prevent it, I'll . . . I'll . . ."

"Sit down, Ellena," Gram said. The rhetoric was gone from her voice. This was an order. I obeyed gladly, for my knees were trembling so I could hardly stand.

"I take it," she said, "that the great romance is a dud."

I nodded my head. I could not speak.

"Well, a dud's a dud," she said quietly. "As long as we have recognized it for what it is, we must treat it accordingly. But I do think—I hope you will not consider me too old-fashioned! I do think there are certain amenities to be preserved."

"Oh, to hell with amenities!" Mother broke out with startling suddenness. She was pale and her hands were shaking. "The amenities are nothing but front. What have they to do with life?"

"They have everything to do with life. Civilized life anyhow. And I would thank you not to interrupt me in the middle of a sentence. Even heathens and barbarians have amenities of a low order. Amenities were our steppingstones in civilization."

I could almost have smiled. Gram spoke with great dignity but I knew she was stalling for time. Mother knew it too, of course. But we let her go on. We too wanted time to pull ourselves together.

"Ellena, my child," Gram said slowly, "I would be the last one in the world to suggest you retain a formal relationship where there is no foundation for it in reality. But we must not forget that there has been and still is a terrible war and in such crises we are honor-bound to make certain concessions that in ordinary circumstances would be intolerable. Everything connected with war is intolerable and yet we have to tolerate it."

"The only intolerable thing about this is being together! Other-

wise it is all quite simple. I do not want him and he doesn't want me. Isn't that enough? It was enough for you and . . . my grandfather."

"Has he said he does not want you?"

"He doesn't have to say so. It sticks out all over him. You can see it! You must have seen it."

"I don't think we have to consider it from Cliff's point of view," Mother said, speaking slowly and choosing her words thoughtfully. "As far as we are concerned, we have only to deal with Ellena. It seems to me it is entirely her problem. It is a thing she must decide for herself. And however she decides—whatever you think you should do, Ellena, and whatever you do—it is all right with me. I only want you to be happy."

I went over impulsively and stood beside her. She smiled up at me and lifted one hand which I clasped in both of mine. She had never let me down! She had been on my side when I went wild and married that perfect stranger, and now, when I saw my mistake, she was on my side in trying to rectify it.

"Then you both feel," Gram said, in a silky voice that should have warned us, "that Cliff should go at once, alone, out to his mother, his blind young brother and his widowed sister with the little orphans and . . . just weather things out with them as best he can?"

I did not like her way of putting it and hesitated for words.

Mother came to my help. "I do not see why Ellena should be expected to weather it for him or for any of the rest of them," she said bravely. I was surprised at her courage in speaking back to Gram so firmly, for she had always seemed rather intimidated by her determination. "If they still loved each other, there would be no question about it. Ellena would go because she would want to go. I see no reason why she should drown herself in the sea of difficulties in which they are floundering—if she no longer loves their son and brother."

I hugged her hard.

Gram had to think that over. The silence was a little strained.

"Very well, Eileen," she said at last. "She is your daughter and she is a free soul. And since we are three women who love one another, facing the future and praying for right solutions of our problems, would you mind telling us, with a frankness equal to

Ellena's, just what your own plans are for the years ahead? Have you charted any path you plan to follow?"

Mother drew a sharp breath. I could feel her shoulders contract under my embracing arm.

I was surprised and puzzled. I could feel tension, electric tension, in the atmosphere of the room, something deeper and more dynamic than my own bombastic outburst had caused. I drew back a little and looked at Mother. She shivered. She twisted her fingers together into tight blue and white angles.

"Sit down, Ellena," Gram said gently. "We have to face the future fairly. Without falsity and without subterfuge. You have been open and honest. Eileen wants to be the same."

So suddenly that it startled me, Mother's twisted hands relaxed and fell into her lap, fingers curled upward, motionless. The shuddering stopped and she lifted her shoulders. She looked, not at Gram, but at me and without flinching.

"As soon as your father comes home," she said evenly, "I am going to ask him for a divorce so I can marry Bob Vandermere."

VI. THE DUCHESS

1

It was below the belt. I realized that. But I do not blame myself, not one iota. If the end would only justify the means, all well and good. If nothing came of it, at least I could remember that I went down trying. I did not want them to be unhappy, especially not Ellena. Perhaps I thought a little unhappiness would be good for Eileen, although in my heart I doubted if she had spirit enough to experience either happiness or pain.

Certainly I had not expected her to come up with that brazen admission. I had thought she would side-step, say she had no immediate personal plans of any kind, which was literally true. If she had done so, I would have refrained carefully from any betrayal but would have gone far enough to arouse Ellena's doubt, possibly mild suspicion. But Eileen came out with the bald truth.

Time! Time! All I was working for was time. Everything had been so rushed, so hectic. Still waters cannot be hurried. So I was working for time. From the bottom of my heart, I had believed that once Dave appeared on the scene, the Vandermere flash-in-the-pan would die a natural and unlamented death. But time must be allowed for Dave's return. And I felt common justice demanded that Ellena's hasty marriage be submitted to the same test—the test of time.

I noticed Ellena's instinctive recoil from her mother at her frank avowal. At least they were no longer in solid alignment against me. It was each for herself from this on. Ellena had not been blind to what was going on. With the unreasonable intolerance of youth she had resented what she considered her mother's silly little fling with Van. She regarded such things as indecent. Indecent, that is, in anybody older than extreme youth. She had felt the same resentment for her grandfather's dignified withdrawal from the home front.

"Sit down, Ellena," I said quietly. "It was inevitable that we should have this talk together. I had not expected it to be quite so soon, that's all. I was momentarily swept off my feet. But it had to come and perhaps the sooner the better. We've got to understand one another."

Eileen stood up suddenly. She looked at me with smoldering rage. "Of course you are against me!" she said. "You always have been! You always think I am wrong! But you are not going to stop me! This time you are not going to stop me! Nobody can!"

She spoke stormily. I was surprised, but I felt grudging admiration. I had never dreamed she would show such spunk.

"I, for one, am not going to turn a finger to stop you," I said calmly, though I was extremely nervous. "Far from thinking you are wrong, I think you are a hundred percent right. A little late about it, but right. Ellena or I would have done it years ago. I don't know how you stood it so long. I wouldn't have stood it. Ellena wouldn't."

Ellena dropped back in her chair. She was against me now for what she considered my lewd sanction of her mother's licentious conduct. Against me and against her mother. That didn't make any difference, for it was temporary. But she was against Cliff, too. That made a great difference, for it might prove eternal.

Eileen brightened at my words. "Do you mean it, Mother? Do you really mean it? Do you really understand?"

"Of course I mean it. I've marveled all these years, the way you stood it! I couldn't imagine what you were made of! Ellena must have marveled, too. She is too clever not to have seen how things were with you and Dave."

Ellena crouched farther away from us and her eyes fell.

I laughed lightly. "After my own debacle with the Pimpnel, how can you think I would have the temerity to find fault with either of you, no matter what happens to your picayune little amours?" I said. "But I still feel there are amenities to be preserved."

"I don't think you are quite justified in calling a marriage of twenty years 'picayune,'" Eileen said, quickly.

"Cliff and I may not hit it off very well, but there's nothing 'picayune' about us," Ellena added hotly.

"Anything that isn't big enough to stand the wear and tear of time is picayune," I said airily. "As with His Excellency and me. It didn't wear. Picayune! Playthings! Pouf!"

"That isn't fair, Mother," Eileen said determinedly. "You were married forty years. Forty years is not picayune—not in anybody's language."

"In terms of life, it is picayune," I insisted. I was beginning to enjoy myself, though I had no idea just where I was heading. "Time is of the essence. Anything that fades with time is ephemeral, of the moment, momentary. Forty years, twenty years, ten days. Picayune."

They were both against me then. I am always at my best with everyone against me.

"Time," Ellena said coldly, "has nothing to do with it."

"Absolutely nothing," Eileen agreed. "It is something far deeper, more spiritual than calendar-reckoning."

"Then this is where we stand," I said: "His Excellency has gone the way of all temporal loves and unions. Eileen is going to divorce Dave and marry Van. Ellena is going to ship Cliff off to his remote and handicapped relatives. And here we are. We three against the world. Until Eileen's divorce, that is. Then we'll have Van."

They gave me ugly looks. It was an ugly way of putting it. Ellena started to give her mother a pained and sympathetic glance and then, remembering what Eileen had in mind against Dave, drew in her lips quickly and hardened her eyes.

"I accept that status," I went on. "Excuse my persistence, but I still think the amenities should be preserved. For forty years I conscientiously preserved them with His Excellency. When our domestic light went out, I still regarded them religiously. I am glad I did. I have no memories of petty spite and childish acrimony to torment me in my dreams. I think you are going to give yourselves very black eyes among your friends, and black consciences in the quiet of your own bedrooms, if you are calloused enough to discard your returning warriors before their armor is dried of our enemies' blood."

"Oh, don't be melodramatic!" Ellena said rudely. "What are you talking about?"

"All right, all right!" Eileen cried hysterically. "What do you want us to do? You admit I am justified in leaving Dave. You agree that Ellena's marriage was a mistake. But you've got something up your nasty little sleeve. What is it?"

"Time," I said quietly. "Just time. Nothing else."

They looked at me with cold, inimical eyes. They tried looking at each other for relief but estrangement was between them, too. So they looked back at me.

"We are all being very low-class and feverish," I said. "His Excellency and I were above such bourgeois theatricals. We've got to think this through. But believe me, girls, whatever decisions you make for yourselves I will co-operate with you in every way and do my best to make your readjustments as easy as possible."

"We have already made our decisions," Eileen reminded me sharply.

"What do you want, anyhow?" Ellena demanded uneasily.

"Time," I repeated. "Girls, I look at it this way: These men, your men, were going through plenty of hell for you for several years. Oh, yes, I know they had to! I know it was for our country and the Constitution and the Bill of Rights, but you know as well as I do that every last man who got into this damned war felt that if anything was to be gained out of it, it was gain for his woman. His sweetheart or his wife or his mother, whomever he had. Some took it four years; many will be taking it for years to come. Say they had an average of two years. Well, by my kind of figuring, you owe your men two years of time."

"They had time!" Eileen said. "Dave had twenty years of me."

"Yes, and you had twenty years of him," I reminded her. "And twenty mighty comfortable, easy years they were. I wouldn't have cared for them myself and if you had cut them short long ago I would not have blamed you. But you waited till he is off over there going through hell and you are financially independent, and now you are going to meet him at the dock with divorce papers. I call it downright indecent. I think you owe him a couple of years."

"What do you figure I owe Cliff?" Ellena cut in. "Don't mention money. I have saved every cent of the allotment he sent me, most of it in war bonds, and I will give it back to him with pleasure."

"I am always generous in my figuring," I said. "I don't see any point in working things out to days and minutes. I should say two years is a good mean average. In both cases."

"His housemaid and nurse, you mean?" she inquired, cuttingly.

"His companion. Ellena, you don't even know the boy. Oh, he's your husband, but you don't really know him from Adam. You fairly flung yourself around his neck until he married you. Now he's blue and sick, he's worried about his family, he isn't sure of a job, and he's irritable as the devil. You're a young woman. Two years won't make a wrinkled old hag of you. No two years you could put in would stack up against what the last two years have done to him. If you are not willing to pay two years of your life—your life, too, Eileen!—in my opinion you are a couple of cheats and cowards and quitters. They are entitled to some installment payments on what they've gone through."

Eileen still looked hard and resentful and showed no sign of yielding. But Ellena's eyes turned suddenly questioning and reflective. She tapped a nervous toe on the kitchen linoleum. "Be more specific," she said. "I am not saying I will do it," she added hastily. "I am not committing myself in any way. But I'm willing to know what you are talking about."

"Just this, Ellena," I explained. "You and Cliff fell in love. Call it puppy passion, call it army glamour, call it anything you like. But you thought you fell in love and I think you did. He's had two hellish years over there. In common decency you owe him two years."

"Do you mean I should work and support him if he is sick? I am willing to do that. I'll send him every cent I make—and I'll sponge on you for my bread and butter."

"I don't mean money. I mean you."

"A mistress?" she said slyly.

"A companion. A bride and a wife, or a reasonable facsimile thereof. You promised him a honeymoon, didn't you? Well, let him have it. Be kind and sympathetic and patient. I admit he's cross

as billy-be-damned. He doesn't know where to turn. He doesn't even appreciate good food when he's eating it. But you owe him two years and I should have more respect for you if you would make an effort to pay your debt."

"You will have more respect for me if I play the hypocrite for two years?"

"No. If you play a part. A difficult role perhaps but you can handle it. You wanted to study for the stage, didn't you? You were always stage-struck. Here is a chance for you to try your hand at it. Call it a martyr role if you want to, but see what you can do with it."

I had taken a few glances at Eileen. She was not looking at me at all. She was watching Ellena. There was a crafty look in her narrowed gaze. A cat, lurking for an unaware mouse.

"How about Mother?" Ellena demanded abruptly. "She has already given Dad twenty years. Does she owe him more?"

"She most certainly does. She did not give him twenty years. They shared twenty years, and they were good years. She got full benefit of everything he did and accomplished. But these last years, while he was fighting a little war for her, she has been having a darned soft time of it here at home, with comfort, with luxuries—rationed, but plenty of them—and with gay society and love affairs thrown in for good measure. You bet she owes him two years."

"How would you expect me to repay the two years?" Eileen's eyes had come back to me. The hysteria was gone from her voice.

"By giving him two years in return. He may come back as nervous and irritable as Cliff. He may be sick and run down. We don't know whether his job is waiting for him or not. Anyhow, it is going to take time for him to readjust himself and that is when he will need help. If Van loves you, he will be willing to wait. If he doesn't—well, you are young enough, you're good-looking enough; there will be thousands of returning soldiers."

She winced at that insinuation. She was a little prudish by nature.

"You want me to live a lie with Dave," she said soberly. "I have never done that. I have always been honest with Dave."

"That is a lie and you know it," I said cruelly. "You have acted a lie with him for years. You pretended to be glad when he came

and sorry when he left, but it was just the other way round. You were glad when he was gone. You have been bored and angry and humiliated, but you acted a long lie in pretense that you were satisfied and contented. Two more years of the same kind of play-acting won't be more dishonest than you've been for years."

It was a terrible moment. We sat there in the kitchen, cold-eyed, glaring at one another as if we were arranging terms of an unpleasant armistice, as indeed we were. It was more than an armistice. Unconditional surrender—that's what it would be on their part. But only temporarily, only for two years. Two lovely, long, blessed years. Miracles could happen in two years.

Eileen and Ellena looked at each other mostly. Their looks were strange and unnatural. It was not a mother-and-daughter regard; it was more of a buy-and-sell. Crafty. Bargaining. I had counted on that.

"Well, how about it, Mother?" Ellena asked suddenly, her voice low and hoarse.

"I am too old," Eileen wailed suddenly. "I am too old—to waste two years of what is left of my life."

"I would not call them wasted," I replied coldly. "Perhaps I think more of Ellena than you do. I would gladly give her the rest of my life."

She smiled with sudden warmth at Ellena. "I didn't mean that," she denied quickly.

Ellena did not respond.

"If Van loves you, he will wait two years. If you love him, you will still want him. And," I added inexorably, "this is a good time to find out in both cases."

"Suppose Cliff doesn't want me," Ellena broke in suddenly. "Suppose he does not want my two years."

"Then, my dear, I hope you can relinquish your role as gracefully as other stars of the stage and home have done," I replied graciously. "But if you are as good an actress as you and I think you are, your name will appear in lights."

"On Broadway?" There was a faint smile on her lips.

"On his heart and in my memory." I smiled too.

Eileen and Ellena were looking at each other again, narrowly, still buy-and-sell.

"Very well," Ellena said suddenly. "I'll do it if you will."

Eileen still hesitated. "It's different in my case," she argued faintly. "I have had twenty years of it—and I haven't much time to go." Then her voice changed suddenly. "Do you mean, Ellena, that you will really try . . . try hard?"

"If you will," Ellena said.

"Very well. I will!"

"There's not to be any funny business about it," Ellena warned her grimly. "It's to be strictly on the level. No love-making on the sly, no secret meetings."

"Ellena!"

"It's got to be strictly on the up-and-up," she said firmly.

"And will you really try, Ellena?" Eileen asked. "Will you try to love Cliff again, if you can, and help him?"

"If you will with Dad," Ellena repeated inexorably.

"All right, Ellena. Your word is enough for me."

She went to the telephone in the foyer and dialed a number. Ellena and I waited in silence but Ellena's eyes were bright and crafty.

Eileen had a long wait for her number.

"Van?" she said at last. There was a brief silence.

"No, Van," she said, "I didn't wake you up for any such thing. I only called to tell you that I am going to wait a long time after Dave comes home—two years probably!—to give him a chance to get readjusted and back to——"

There was a long interruption. Finally she broke in sharply. "No! Listen to me, Van. I am quite determined. If we love each other as we think, two years of waiting will not hurt us. If we don't—well, then, much better not."

There was another torrent of words.

"Oh, but I'm not going to do any such thing, Van. I am not going to see you at all. I am not going with you or where you are. I'm going to give him two honest years."

And then: "Oh no, Van, it isn't that. I love you. I'm sure I will

still be loving you in two years. I'm just paying back the time I owe him—when I've been so happy with you and he hasn't been happy at all. Bye, Van. Be seeing you in two years—or maybe not. I love you. Good-by."

She came back to the kitchen. Ellena was standing up.

She held out her hand to her mother. "Okay, sport," she said cheerfully. "Here we go!"

VII. ELLENA

1

I WAS ashamed of Mother. About Van, I mean. It had been a little disgusting, watching her giggling gaiety through the flirtation. Disgusting but nothing to worry about. I had spoken of it, kiddingly, in my letters to Dad. I called Van Mother's bald boy friend. I knew Dad would get a kick out of it.

But until Gram cornered her, it had never once entered my head that she would chuck her whole world, and Dad, and me, just to hang onto him. Van, in my opinion, just plain wasn't worth it.

Gram is very shrewd. Shrewd and slick.

She was shocked and sorry when I dragged them both down to the kitchen that night and staged my small Hitlerian act. One act, I had thought it was going to be. Gram turned the tables very neatly and put us both on the hot spot. But after my first flame of fury, I could see what she was up to. If we could hang onto Mother until Dad got home everything would be all right.

I never would have agreed to any such preposterous compromise except that it was a chance to hang onto Mother—hang onto her and keep her from hurting Dad. And to do Gram justice, I am sure she would never have asked it of me. She could see how utterly hopeless everything was between Cliff and me but she had to use me as a kind of weapon over Mother until Dad got home. I was young. Two years of my life were a small price to pay for maintaining our home, for backing Dad, and keeping Mother from tearing off in His Excellency's mad footsteps. . . . Mother! . . . Of all people!

I wasn't sure it would work, for the foundations of my ridiculous little world were shattered that night, but if two years of play-acting might conceivably turn the trick, I was willing to play-act my head off and my heart out. However much it hurt! And it was going to hurt. But if Cliff could get any benefit out of it in the process I did not begrudge it to him. I didn't care how much benefit he got out of anything as long as it was away from me, far, far away.

So we shook hands on the agreement. I was proud of Mother for burning her bridge so firmly behind her. I knew I could trust her. And she could trust me, too. We both knew we couldn't trust Gram out of our sight, but that didn't matter, because this was a contest to the finish for Mother and me.

When the talk was over and we were separating for what was left of the night, I went into Cliff's room and yanked an armful of clothes out of the closet. . . . Cliff's room. Gram and Mother had started off referring to it sentimentally as "your room," but it wasn't. There wasn't any "our" about it. It was Cliff's. A pestilence placard on the door would not have made it more obvious.

I did not try to be quiet that night. It didn't make any difference whether he was asleep or not, he would pretend to be. And so he did. So I yanked out the clothes and trekked my familiar trail to the bathroom. I was excited and frightened but determined. I had to set Mother a good example. I had to put on a superior act, so that when poor Dad got home she would be morally obligated to strive for my high level.

I did all the things I had done before in the bathroom. I took another long, slow bath. I removed my make-up and brushed my hair. I put on fresh make-up and tucked my hair up neatly again. As a last resort I manicured my toenails; or is it pedicured?

I opened the door softly. No lights were showing anywhere. I could hear Mother crying softly in her darkened room. I admit to a long, breathless pause. Then I had a brilliant thought.

"The egg-nog glasses. I probably forgot to wash them."

I went downstairs noiselessly, feeling my way carefully in the darkness. But I had not forgotten. The glasses were washed. The coffee cups were washed. The three kitchen chairs were standing, stiff and stark, in the center of the room, mute reminders of our bitter interview. I put them back in place. Since there was nothing else to do, I went into the living room and sat down on the big divan.

"I can sleep here!" I thought happily. "I can sleep here and think this thing out. I have to memorize my lines."

I got a couple of fur coats from the hall closet and went to bed on the divan. I did not feel at all sleepy.

I had to do a good job, a damned good job. A flop would not help anybody. And I had a vague feeling that if I made a huge success of my odd role it might conceivably cheer Cliff up a little before we shipped him out to all the sadness waiting for him.

I thought of no end of ridiculous things I might do, then realized how ridiculous they were and let them go. But on the main point, I think my reasoning was right. I had to become a person again, an attractive girl—not just some vague character he had stumbled across and inadvertently married and wished he hadn't. I had to come alive. Otherwise, I couldn't set Mother a good example and give her something to live up to.

I must have gone to sleep because I wakened suddenly and it was morning. Gram was standing beside the divan looking down at me. A grotesque figure. When she dressed for purpose, any purpose, it was to the king's own taste. But when she dressed for convenience, she was guilty of odd and horrifying lapses. That morning, over a delicate, ruffled mauve negligee, she had drawn a heavy gray woolen sweater. The effect was startling.

"Hello," I said. I had worked so hard at my role that I smiled at her almost naturally.

"Hello," she said. "You are a good sport, Ellena. I think you are beginning to take after me. Which God forbid, as Pimpernel would say. I'm on my way for hot coffee."

"Get it going. I'll be right with you."

By the time I reached the kitchen she was frowning thoughtfully over a steaming cup. "I hope you realize," she said abruptly, "that my daughter is a fool."

"I hope you realize," I said cheerfully, "that your daughter is my mother. . . . Besides, aren't we all?"

I poured coffee into a cup and sat down opposite her at the small table. "And speaking of realization, please listen carefully, Duchess," I went on. "Working the devil's wonders as you are in some mysterious way, I hope you realize that you are going to be a good deal inconvenienced."

She frowned more deeply. "Just what have you in mind?" she asked coldly.

"Your room. Your bed and your room. I want you to switch

with—with Cliff. You must know, from experience, Gram, that one can't be entirely bridal in twin beds. Especially when your husband doesn't like your looks."

She started to laugh but quickly checked herself. "It's the best bed in the house," she protested.

"And the only double. I think you'll enjoy the front of the house for a change. You can sit at the window and watch the motors going by and wonder where they get the gas. There will be some switching of furniture, too. But your room and your bed are the A priority. Including your private bath, of course."

Mother came in, looking wan and dispirited. "I knew you two would be up to something," she said. "Is there any aspirin?"

"You don't need aspirin," I said. "Here! How about coffee? Sit down and lend me some motherly support. I am staking a claim on Gram's bed and she doesn't like it."

"I didn't say you couldn't have the bed!" she retorted indignantly. "I just said it was a crime to waste such a good bed on a couple of fools who don't like each other."

"Are you really going through with this, Ellena?" Mother asked, faint hope in her voice.

"Not unless you are!" I said fiercely. "And this is your last chance to make up your mind."

"My mind is made up," she said quietly. "I just wanted to be sure of you."

"I'd like to be sure of a few things myself," Gram said hotly. "For instance, I'd like to be sure that I won't be chivvied up to the attic before we're through with all this."

"Plenty of room in the attic," I reminded her spitefully. "Three large, airy rooms, exquisitely furnished, sufficient to accommodate a regiment of Iowa Lindleys."

Gram got out of the predicament by laughing. We laughed too. Mother looked so woebegone that I did my best to rally round. I made a lot of jokes about what I was going to do and asked who was going to raise the curtain and who would prompt me if I forgot my lines and finally we all got slightly cheered up. At least they did. Any cheering-up in me was strictly on the surface. Because I

couldn't forget that pretty soon my curtain was going up and there would be no prompter and I would have to improvise my lines.

"Ting-a-ling-ling-ling!" I said. "That's my call. Must be off to the dressing room. It's the star's room right now but I'll relinquish to you, Mother—as soon as Dad comes home."

I went upstairs. I had not been trying to look particularly nice before Cliff. He didn't look at me anyhow, for one thing, and I remembered something about putting forbidden sweets before babies. Mostly it was a vague feeling that the less easy to look at, the easier the out—or words to that effect. So I had worn crisp, businesslike, office clothes. But that morning I got out my best blue and gold pajamas, sleek satin, that I had been saving for state occasions—like honeymoons. I fixed my hair with little flowered combs to match the blue. I thumbed my nose at the mirror.

When I went downstairs for Cliff's breakfast tray Gram and Mother eyed me appraisingly.

"Actresses use entirely too much face paint," Gram said. "Any fool would know those roses aren't real."

"It's no wonder burlesque is out of business," Mother said. "The legitimate dresses so indecently there's no market for strip-tease."

"Do I have to kiss him?" I inquired.

"I shouldn't think so," Gram said thoughtfully. "He's pretty sick and I'm not sure these wartime cosmetics are hygienic."

"You can turn your face sideways and make a sibilant noise," Mother added.

"Just wait till it's your turn," I said. "I'm already thinking up dirty cracks and recording them in my diary."

I went up with the tray slowly. It was easy putting up a good front before Mother but I knew I would feel a perfect fool doing it before Cliff.

"But I don't care about Cliff," I reminded myself stoutly. "I am willing to be a perfect fool for Mother—and especially for Dad. And a little for plain old-fashioned respectability."

Cliff was lying there, hands locked behind his head, obviously awaiting nourishment.

"Coffee coming up," I said.

I put the tray on the bedside table. He glanced at me dourly, an up-and-down glance. I crossed the room and brazenly raised the blinds.

"Are you just getting in from a night out?" he asked, conversationally but not interestedly.

"Yes. A night out on the divan in the living room. It was a wild night."

He kept his eyes studiously on his fruit cup. His papers said "plenty of fruit" but he was so damned indifferent he wouldn't think of digging the meat out of a grapefruit, even when it was carefully cut. So he got it in a cup. He glanced across at me once or twice, rather oddly, and quickly back to the fruit.

I sat down on my bed across from him. I sprawled out, head on elbow at the foot, and pulled a pillow under my hips. I dangled my fifteen-dollar blue and gold mules up and down.

"Eat heartily, Cliff," I said. "Imbibe as much nourishment as you can. You are going to need vitamins. You are moving today."

"Moving." He ventured a glance at the blue and gold satin and returned decorously to the tray.

"Yes. Down the hall. You're being chucked out of this room into another one."

"Am I getting in somebody's way?"

"No, not specially. Gram wants to come down here so she and Mother can gossip about us back and forth at night when we are locked off down the hall and can't hear a word. It's going to be much nicer but there will be a lot of huffing and puffing and lugging of this and this, so please reinforce yourself with any calories that may be lurking round about."

"I'll be glad to huff and puff for you but as a lugger I am afraid I'm still pretty much no good."

"You cannot do our huffing and puffing. We dote on that. The trouble is that we will probably end up in a pitched battle because we all want to huff and puff and nobody wants to lug."

"You seem very cheerful this morning," he remarked, in his driest voice. All his voices were dry.

"I am always cheerful," I said. "Only this morning for a change I have an audience. It's a nice change. I quite like it."

There was gravel in that but I couldn't help it. He did not seem to notice. I smiled disarmingly but he did not notice that either. He was regarding his eggs so intently that I leaned over and looked at them myself to see what was so interesting about them. They looked like ordinary eggs to me.

"Did you tell them I shall probably be going home very soon?" he asked, distracting himself from the eggs with an effort.

"Cliff, you must study up on the regulations around here," I said. "The first rule is, never tell anybody anything. If you tell them you are going to do something, they gang right up and won't permit you. If you tell them you aren't going to do anything, they get together and think up no end of things and make you do them all. The best policy is to remember that the enemy is always listening and keep your mouth shut. I think we caught it from the war."

He almost laughed but took another spoonful of egg so quickly I wasn't sure. Talking kiddingly to him like that was not so hard as I had thought it would be. The hardest thing was getting started in the first place. Once started it was fairly easy to keep going. He raised his eyes from the egg just high enough to reach a point about an inch below my left knee, modestly sheathed in blue satin. He regarded it frowningly. I leaned over and looked.

"If it is a hole, it is either a moth or Gram dropped a cigarette ash on me," I said reassuringly. But he did not seem reassured. His eyes returned immediately to the egg.

"When is all this moving scheduled to happen?" he asked, after what seemed a few hours of concentrated silence.

"Almost immediately. When you hear a sudden upstairs charge, to the tune of heated argument over which chair goes where, you will know the ground crew is in action. But you won't be rushed. It will take hours to remove all of Gram's make-up. Not from her face. From her dressing table and vanity and bathroom. Gram's make-up is our favorite indoor sport. She can't see a thing without glasses but she is so vain she won't wear them unless absolutely necessary and the result is that she's very apt to appear in face pack instead of foundation."

"She always looks very nice to me," he said loyally.

"Thanks to our unremitting vigilance."

I got him through breakfast all right. And in spite of himself he was interested. As soon as I went out with the tray he got up and shaved and put on fresh pajamas. He tied his bathrobe around him with becoming decorum and sat in the chair by the window waiting for events. He had quite a wait.

When the mail came I took the paper up to him and a couple of letters. Both from Iowa.

"What's become of the movers?" he asked.

"They are arguing," I said. "Gram has a favorite chair and it happens to be my favorite, too. They are tossing a coin to decide who gets it but I've already got the chair out of sight in the closet."

"Tossing a coin shouldn't take long."

"You never tossed a coin with Gram. She cheats. It if doesn't suit her the first time, she makes it two out of three and then three out of five. I've tossed with her up to fifty-one out of a hundred. You mark my words, for that chair she'll toss coins up to five hundred and one out of a thousand. She doesn't know I've already salvaged the chair."

That wasn't what it really was, of course. It was really just a quiet, systematic, orderly working out of my plan. Gram always insisted on quiet and orderly working out, even of the wildest plans.

First she removed all of her personal things from her room. Mother cleaned the room and wiped out drawers while I polished mirrors and rubbed up bathroom fixtures. Then, gradually, I moved the things down from Cliff's room and the hall bath, and Mother and Gram stowed them neatly away in proper places. He didn't say much but he was interested. I knew he was interested because he watched everything I did and did not pretend to be asleep every time I entered the room.

I was quite pleased. I hadn't expected to get him interested the first day. I really should have gone in for dramatic art. Of course, on the stage they get one interested inside five minutes but no theater audience is so willfully unresponsive as that solitary figure was in tightly belted bathrobe glowering in the big chair. He didn't want to be interested. I had done it in spite of him, and that was an accomplishment.

Gram's room was lovely, with ten windows overlooking the garden. Mother laid a small fire in the fireplace and Gram got out the best towels and rugs for the rose-tinted bathroom. It was a good thing we had so many things to do. Otherwise I should certainly have fallen down on my part. But every time I began to think and looked a little distraught one of them would say, "See here, Ellena, how about carting this up to the attic?" Or, "How about trotting down to the basement with this?" And I was glad to keep trotting. A horse, I thought, must have a very nice life, just trotting, shaking his mane, and never bothering to think.

At noon we went into Cliff's room with a trayful of sandwiches and salad and deviled eggs. We flopped exhausted on the beds and Cliff got up and did the honors, passing things, pouring coffee. Gram had replaced her negligee and sweater with slacks and another sweater. Mother had resorted to brief shorts and a bra. I stuck to the blue and gold pajamas. Mother had a skinned knee where she had stumbled on the stairs and a little trickle of blood had run down to the rim of her socks. Gram had a cobweb over her left eye and a smudge of soot on one cheek. I had torn a big gash in the knee of one pajama leg and didn't even try to keep white flesh from showing through the rent. Cliff could hardly keep from laughing at us.

"If anybody had told me—at my age—" Gram began, and added, "Not that I have any age to speak of."

"Don't let her fool you, Cliff," Mother said. "She has plenty of age to speak of. She declines to speak of it, that's all."

"I am consumed with curiosity," Cliff said, almost pleasantly. "I can't tell by the sounds whether I am to be transplanted to basement or attic. There has been action on both fronts."

"More coffee, please," Mother said. "I should have known better than to let Ellena select my son-in-law. It would be somebody comfortably sick in bed while we are moving furniture!"

Cliff, still thinking the moving was to gratify some whim of Gram's, smiled across at her and said, "You know, Duchess, once before I wondered if maybe you were a little crazy and Dave said——"

He paused. The three of us came to quick attention.

"What did Dave say?" Gram encouraged him softly.

"He said, 'Yeh, crazy like a fox.' "

Mother and I looked at each other in complete understanding and broke into hearty laughter. Crazy like a fox! I glanced guiltily at Gram. She was laughing, too.

"I like foxes," she said placidly. "They have such sleek little heads."

We made Cliff lie down for a brief rest after our luncheon. We were almost ready. And I was beginning to be frightened again. I kept thinking of his first look at the lovely room, the low fire, the library alcove and that other alcove with the big bed, one bed. . . .

I took a slow bath and dressed in a nice, frilly printed gown. Mother kissed me. Gram said I looked beautiful.

"Your cue," she said encouragingly.

They went downstairs together. The curtain was going up. I walked slowly upstage alone and opened the door of Cliff's room. "Coast all clear," I said. "Ready to be transplanted?"

He got up with alacrity. "What's become of the movers?" he asked.

"They've gone to the basement so they can't hear your bellows of rage if you object to your new quarters."

He followed me down the hall. The door of Gram's room—our room—was open. He stopped in the doorway. It was beautiful—beautiful enough for a bridal room. Only there wasn't any bride or groom.

"How very lovely!" he said.

He entered slowly and smiled—smiled at the low fire, the wide windows, the luxurious library alcove. Then he turned and saw the other alcove. He looked at it soberly for a while. Then he looked at me.

"Are these to be . . . my new quarters?" he asked quietly.

"Ours," I said, almost whispering because I could hardly get my breath.

"Will you like this arrangement, Ellena?"

"I think so, Cliff. . . . I hope so."

For the moment I forgot I was acting a part. For the moment I think I really hoped so.

2

There was no mention among us that there was anything special about this day. But we all felt it. Hortense, arriving late, sensed it immediately and prepared a particularly good dinner. And with entirely unprompted unanimity, we dressed up a little—nothing elaborate, but obvious. Cliff wore his best uniform with all the ribbons and décor. It was the first time he had bothered to put it on. We had cocktails before dinner and were quite gay.

I was excited, so excited I was not always sure where my role left off and my natural self began. Gram and Mother played up magnificently. I couldn't have written lines for them that would have been so effective as the ones they ad-libbed.

"Cliff," Gram said, "I stumbled over the sports page of the paper today and it reminded me that I know less than nothing about you. Were you interested in sports when you were in college?"

"Didn't Dean Fanshaw tell you?" he asked good-naturedly.

"Dean Fanshaw is not sports-minded," she retorted quickly. "The question is, were you interested in sports?"

"I was and am. Any sport and all sports. Particularly in good sports, of which you are three sterling examples. As for my extra-curricular activities, I played in everything I could get into. I was never All-American but I was a darn close runner-up a time or two. . . . By the way, did either of you censor Ellena's letters to me overseas?"

"Certainly not! What do you think we are, a couple of snoops?"

"You overlooked a bet there. You would have found it highly edifying. I did. But I was more mystified than edified. It was all clippings, but the most amazing collection of clippings: poetry, sports, cartoons, off-color jokes, pin-up pictures, excerpts from sermons—a collection for a chameleon. I think maybe I am beginning now to see what she was driving at but I didn't get it then."

"Is that some kind of a decoration you have on?" Gram interrupted cheerfully. "And if so, does it mean anything or is it one of those foreign hotel ads they used to plaster on suitcases?"

"It is a decoration. It is the D.S.M."

"Did you buy it or earn it?"

"The answer is a literal no on both points. It was given to me."

"What for?" Gram asked. "I don't know why we are still saving tin cans if they have enough metal to pass medals out wholesale."

"This isn't wholesale. I got it, believe it or not, for falling on my head. We were building a road and all of a sudden the bombers came over and we got the alert. I had the distinction of being the most alert in our outfit when the alarm came. So I dived headfirst into a foxhole. But it was not a foxhole. It was a neat little Nazi nest and they were so taken aback, or upside down, that they surrendered. When I got back on my feet they were disconcerted to find I was not an entire regiment and tried to withdraw their surrender but I stood on the Geneva Convention and held them to their bargain."

"That's very interesting," Mother said. "If the War Department had any sense, it would learn a lesson from that and train all our soldiers to fight upside down."

Cliff was nervous, though. I glanced at him pretty often, which was safe enough because he never looked at me. His eyelids twitched. His fingers, holding silver or glass, were clenched and the knuckles were white. But he was trying to be pleasant.

When my voice went up to a higher pitch than normal, Gram's eyes and Mother's turned quietly upon me. Their lips smiled but their eyes were quiet. They steadied me.

We stayed downstairs longer than usual, talking, listening to the radio, postponing the inevitable retirement. But the inevitable cannot be postponed forever. Those two pairs of quiet eyes reminded me that it was my cue.

I stood up. "Cliff, have you forgotten you are in the presence of veteran nurse's aides? They'll chuck you into mustard plasters if you don't watch your sick-bed hours. . . . Nightie-night, Gram and Mother."

I started upstairs. Cliff paused at the door to deliver a vague and verbose dissertation on something and presently there were good nights and he followed me slowly.

I went briskly to the bedroom alcove, removed the spread and

folded it carefully. I turned back the covers and shook up the pillows. I put cigarettes and ash trays on the bedside table and adjusted the lights.

Cliff headed straight for the bathroom and came out in the usual tightly belted robe. He sat down before the low embers in the fireplace and lighted a cigarette. I got my things from the closet and had my turn in Gram's big bath. I wore my wedding nightgown and my best negligee and flimsiest slippers. But I did not feel flimsy. I felt heavy and leaden and cold. When I came out only dim lights were burning in the room, one at the bedside and the fireplace *torchères*.

I stood at the head of the couch. He held up his hand to me and I sat down beside him, close but not touching, though he still held my hand.

"Ellena," he said, "I was very much in love with you. I still think you are the loveliest girl in the world and wonderful in every way. But it was so long ago. I can't remember what it was like to be in love. I just feel old and cold and tired. Uneasy—that's how I feel. Uneasy about everything. I wish the Heinies had got me. . . . Ellena, I know you don't want to stay here tonight—in this room I mean. Don't feel you have to stay. You haven't any obligation. There's an extra bed in that other room down the hall. You don't have to stay here."

For a few minutes I stepped clear out of character. I forgot all about my role. One can't be play-acting when she is strictly and brutally honest.

"Cliff," I said. "I know how you feel. I was in love with you like that, too. I thought at the time it was perfect ecstasy but now I can't for the life of me remember what was so nice about it. And there's nothing to feel uneasy about; we don't have to stay married. But since for the time being we really are, shouldn't we at least try to get acquainted again? After all, we want to be friends, don't we? We may get to be quite fond of each other, one never knows about those things. Anyhow, I am willing to try, if you want to."

He turned suddenly and put his arms around me. He pressed his face against my shoulder and cried. Cried hard. I cried too. I knew

he was thinking about his blind young brother and his widowed sister and her babies and I thought of them. But I thought of myself, too; him and me.

"It isn't going to be so hard," I thought. "He's like a poor, sick, worried child. He doesn't know what he wants or where to turn and I will be very kind and patient. Two years isn't long . . ."

I held him in my arms until the fire was quite dead. He shivered suddenly.

"Into bed with you, quick!" I cried. "Do you want to bring that hornet's nest of nurse's aides down on us? Hurry! If you so much as sneeze I'll make you swallow two hot-water bottles and sleep with a box of aspirin at your feet! Hurry!"

VIII. EILEEN

1

THE Duchess had always had pretty much her own way with me, usually sweeping me off my feet with her enthusiasm or talking me down with glib arguments that sounded entirely plausible until one started checking up and found they held water like a sieve. I think I had never been so bitter and so resentful as that night in the kitchen when she showed me to Ellena in a grimy mirror. Unfairly, too, for everything had been strictly aboveboard with Van and me.

But even in my bitterness and my anger I could see what she had in mind and, though unfair to me, it was a good thing. A good thing for Ellena. I did not just yield spinelessly to the Duchess' arguments, as so often before. I decided deliberately to make the sacrifice in hope that it might help Ellena. And it was a sacrifice. I had cultivated my courage to the point of complete sufficiency, and then of my own free will put it away in cold storage.

I was sure Ellena and Cliff could love each other again if they would only give themselves a chance. Cliff was irritating, he was indifferent and stubborn, all at sea within himself, but a nice boy. Ellena had loved and married him. They had never had a chance to see how very sweet marriage can be when it is sweet. They owed each other that. I was afraid, too, that if it ended in such disillusionment and frustration it might have a permanent psychological effect on Ellena, for she was emotional and high-strung. And I wanted for her the normal life of a normal woman.

All this was going through my mind while Gram was staging her little theatrical and though I was bitterly angry, I knew she was right. I realized she was using me as a weapon, a sword of Damocles over Ellena's head, but it seemed no more than fair that a mother should be utilized for her child's happiness. But I begrudged the two years.

"Time," Gram said. "Time is all I ask."

Two years was not too exorbitant a price for me to pay for Ellena, so I shook hands on the strange bargain we made that night.

Two years! I think I comforted myself a little with the thought that it would not take two years. If Ellena and Cliff didn't discover some buried webs of lingering love long before that, they were too impatient, too intolerant, to order their lives by calendar months. I had no compunctions about Dave. Our divorce might disrupt his routine, but the disruption would be brief and barely discernible on the surface. He was too well schooled for that.

"It won't even upset his digestion," I told myself.

I adhered strictly to our agreement. Van was off my schedule for two years.

It was not long before I began reaping the fruits of my sacrifice and they were sweet. The Duchess, for once, was absolutely right and her arguments held water. Ellena did a magnificent job. It was hard at first. Cliff's nerves were badly shot and as far as we could see he hardly tried to restrain them. But there was one quick change. When he yielded to a sudden flash of temper, or snarled surlily over some trifling inconvenience, he would apologize in a halfhearted way. "I'm sorry," or, "Excuse the frazzled nerves," or even, "I shouldn't have said that." Halfhearted apology, perhaps, but a definite improvement. And he tried to be better company, more agreeable with all of us.

Within a few days they were actually looking at each other, straight in the face, with smiling eyes. That was infinite progress. Gram and I exchanged beams of triumph.

Gram and I were getting along very well after the flare-up. She realized that I had done it for Ellena, just as I realized she had asked it only for her. The first time we were alone together, she said gratefully, "Eileen, I am very proud of you. As you know, I have never had a trace of martyr-complex but I do believe that self-sacrifice pays dividends. I was never put to such a test myself; I hope I could have been big enough to do the same thing for you. But I am not sure of it."

That from her was high praise and encouraged me. For it was not easy. Two years is a long time when one is forty-two.

But on the whole things were going well with Ellena and Cliff.

Once in a while—not often—we, watching with such devoted interest, saw her visibly draw herself together away from him; saw her tightening lips, her darkening eyes, stiffening shoulders. At those times we scrupulously held our peace, said nothing; for by unvoiced agreement, we were leaving Ellena's job exclusively to her. We looked at her and hoped our quiet gaze was conveying our trust and understanding.

Usually she would go out alone for a while, walking very fast with long steps. But she never stayed long. Always she came back smiling and Cliff would mumble terse apology, wishing somebody would tear his tongue out by the roots or amputate his entire nervous system leaving him as good and lovable as a nice soft jellyfish.

But in a surprisingly short time, their eyes were all for each other again, rapturous and warm. Their voices were tender and their hands touched often, lingeringly.

Well worth two years of a mother's life, even at forty-two.

Cliff would not ask for the medical discharge to which they said he was entitled, but when his month's sick leave was up they gave him another thirty days. He said they were holding him in abeyance, waiting to make sure he was tough enough to justify shipping space back to action. His health improved steadily and his disposition along with it. When he was given the second thirty-days, it was Ellena, not he, who suggested they take a holiday trip to Iowa together. She said she wanted to go chiefly to prove to the Lindleys that she was a legitimate appendage, but that in addition it would not do Cliff any harm to begin making contacts and instituting leads and inquiries, tending to a job when and if the War Department had enough of him.

They spent over three weeks there. The house seemed quiet and dull without them but Mother and I were still on cordial and appreciative terms so we weathered it very well.

I had continued writing to Dave, still in the Pacific area, my regular long weekly letter, the same kind of letters I had been writing for twenty years; twenty-two years it was, now. And he, too, wrote regularly, and just as he had always written, both as to quantity and content, not saying much, but then we took it for granted with Dave that the less he said the better things were going.

Sometimes I wished impatiently that he would hurry along home so I could actually get to work on my own two-year stretch but the thought of all it would entail inclined me to patience. At long distance, I was not finding hypocrisy a tortuous route, because it was only a continuance of our twenty years. But it had not been downright hypocrisy then because I was not planning a different and independent route, as I was now.

After a longer interval than usual I received an air-mail special from him. He was in California. He would be coming as soon as possible, but did not yet know the exact time.

This was the news we had for Ellena and Cliff when they returned from their joyous jaunt to Iowa.

Ellena gave me a straight challenging look. "That's nice," she said. "That's very nice, Mother. Curtain going up on act two. He will be here to officiate at the christening of his first grandchild."

"Ellena!" That was I.

"El-le-na!" That was Gram.

"Ellena!" Triumphantly, a cocky crow from Cliff. "Me, too, of course," he added.

"Well, it's nothing to get upset about," Gram said, rallying slowly. "It's about time we had a war baby. Heaven knows we've had everything else. Nothing to be upset about."

"Who's upset?" demanded Cliff. "We're not upset. We're not at all upset."

"Quite the contrary," Ellena corroborated cheerfully. "We're just plain set."

I was upset, for one. I was terribly upset. Not about the baby. About my act. It wasn't going to be so easy for me as it had been for her. Besides, her play had a happy ending.

"Mine is going to have a happy ending, too!" I told myself hotly. "A perfectly happy ending."

But something inside me asked nastily, "For whom?"

Well, for me, anyhow. And it was about time! At least it would not mean unhappiness for anybody. Nothing but the inconvenience of a changed routine.

They had more news for us, too. Cliff had been assigned a temporary post in the Engineers Branch of the Pentagon right there in

Washington. Gram supposed, sarcastically, that he was releasing some WAVE for active duty. Cliff said he thought not; as he understood it they had taken on two extras, one to tell him what to do and another to help him do it. But it relieved some of the tension to know they would be right there in Washington, to give me moral support in my play-acting.

I wondered if there had been any unhappiness with the Duchess and my father. She had given no such indication and his letters gave the lie to the idea.

I would carry through, but it would not be easy. I would give all the answers as I had done for twenty years but, now for the first time, I realized that all my answers would be lies.

I lost ten pounds in the ten days that elapsed before we got word that he was actually leaving California and on his way.

"Where . . . where will we put him?" I asked nervously.

"Oh, we'll have to do another job of moving," Gram said calmly. "You'll switch back to the guest room and I'll stow away in the cubbyhole."

"I suppose we could be magnanimous and surrender the bridal suite," Ellena suggested, without much enthusiasm.

"Oh, no! No, indeed!" I objected hurriedly. "The guest room will be fine for us. We really prefer twin beds."

Cliff helped with our moving and the necessary readjustments. He was gay, laughing immoderately over his memories of our first upheaval. He tried to persuade us to dress for the occasion in our original costumes, slacks and shorts and gold-and-blue pajamas, but there was no responsive gaiety in us. Gram eyed me with dogged determination. Ellena looked at me with sympathy, but with infuriating confidence. She could trust me. Everybody had always trusted me.

Dave telephoned as soon as he got to Washington. It was noon. He asked in detail about the exact state of health of each of us, by name, and explained that he had some reports to turn in to headquarters but would arrive at the house at four-thirty. I offered to drive down for him but he said, "Oh, no, don't bother. If my two stars don't rate me the use of an army car I'll chuck them into the garbage."

"Have you a long leave, Dave?" I asked, and felt myself flushing, for I knew that Gram and Ellena were intently regarding the back of my head, which I kept studiously toward them.

"Very long. The rest of my life, in fact. They figure I've done my share and I am out."

"Dave, you . . . you mean you are out of the Army? For good?"

"Yes. I got a shell fragment in one of my legs and developed a distinguished but unmilitary limp. They don't countenance limping generals so I get a vacation."

"Shell fragment!" I exclaimed. "When did you get that? Is it serious?"

"It isn't at all serious. Not now. But don't go thinking up heavy chores for me, like moving pianos or shoving a truck. Just remember that my limp is not an affectation, like a monocle; it's bona fide. See you at four-thirty."

They had gathered close and when I turned, their eyes were anxious and their faces grave.

"Shell fragment!" Gram said, derisively but with apparent uneasiness. "Whoever heard of a general in range of shells?"

"If I remember my statistics, plenty of generals have been bumped off in this war," Cliff said. "Generals are more expendable than they used to be."

"Where is he now, Mother?"

"He didn't say. He has to report to the War Department. He is out of the service."

"If he's reporting to the Pentagon we shan't be seeing him till the war's over," Gram said flippantly, but she frowned, and she looked at me oddly, with doubt in her eyes. She started toward the kitchen and I saw the faint signaling flicker of her eyelashes toward Ellena. Ellena followed her.

I did not excuse myself. I just waved a hand to Cliff and went. Sure enough, they were in the kitchen, standing close together, whispering. They jumped when I swung the door.

"Haven't you any manners?" Gram said irritably. "Don't you know it's rude for everybody to go off and leave company alone?"

"Who's company?"

"Why . . . Cliff, of course."

"I do not consider the father of my approaching grandchild company," I said. "What's the matter with you, Gram? If it's something about Dave I think I have a right to know it."

"Oh, Dave," she said vaguely. Then she rose to it, as she rose to everything. "Yes, we were talking about Dave. I was asking Ellena. I wondered if you and she had heard something you haven't told me. She knows nothing about it. But it seems very funny to me. Dave isn't the type to get himself wounded and out of the Army without breaking the news gently. Was he in the hospital?"

"If he was, he never mentioned it to me."

"Did he ever mention gunshot?"

"Not to me."

"Not to me, either." Ellena came to the rescue. "Not a word of it."

"Are you sure he didn't say gout?"

Ellena and I laughed at that, but faintly.

"Laugh if you like," she said, "but the whole thing sounds very fishy. And not at all like Dave."

Suddenly I knew what was lurking in the back of her mind. "If you mean, Mother, that you think I reneged on my bargain and told Dave what was in the offing between us and this caused his sudden unheralded return, you are mistaken. I have said not one word. I have kept scrupulously to our agreement."

Ellena came quickly and kissed me. "I know you have, Mother," she said sincerely. "I have never doubted it."

"That's one thing to be said for you, Eileen," Gram said reasonably: "we all know you can be trusted. . . . But I must say it's very disconcerting and I wish we could get to the bottom of it."

2

I did not feel nervous about it. I was very calm. I just had to go ahead as I had for twenty years. The only difference was that now I had to be a conscious, premeditated hypocrite. Fortunately Dave was not of a suspicious nature and not so astute as Cliff. He would be more easily fooled. And I would not have to resort to dramatics—just go along as I had gone along before, quiet and pleasant and

acquiescent. That was all he would expect and all he would want of me.

We got dressed and sat about, waiting quietly. Cliff was in his best uniform again. Occasionally I caught a veiled gleam in Gram's eye but I was able to look her squarely in the face and she banished it hurriedly.

We were all watching the time and watching the front windows. At four-twenty Ellena said nervously, "He will be late, of course. The traffic can always be counted on for a delay. And those silly war conferences last forever."

"He will be here at four-thirty," I said. "He remembers to allow for traffic jams and silly appointments."

At four-thirty a long army car pulled up to the curb. A driver and another enlisted man were in the front seat. They swung down and opened the door and began removing baggage. A young captain stepped out and stood watching attentively but did not offer a hand as Dave got out. Dave started immediately for the house, the captain beside him, the enlisted men following with the bags. He did not exactly limp but walked stiffly—erect, but with some stiffness.

"He could put that on for effect," Gram said softly.

Except for the slight stiffness he looked well, tanned and healthy, with good color. We waited, watching from the window. We did not go out to meet him. He did not like fussing over him, especially before servicemen. When he rang, I went to the door.

"Well, Dave," I said, just as I had said every day for twenty years when he came in.

"Hello, Eileen. Everything Okay? . . . Leave the bags right there, boys. Thank you. . . . Thank you very much, Captain." He shook hands with the captain, the three men saluted, and they went briskly away to the car.

When the door closed behind them, the others came out into the hall at once. Gram and I kissed him, Cliff and he shook hands and grinned. Ellena squeezed him in both arms and he patted her shoulder.

"Easy there, baby. Soft pedals on the game leg."

He was still in uniform. Cliff took his gloves and hat and we

trooped back to the living room and stood there while he looked us over and we looked at him smiling. But Gram's lids were still lowered and there was an ominous glitter in the little blue slits beneath them. Obviously she scented a rat. But my conscience was clear.

"Do sit down, everybody," she said. "Are you trying to show up my age? I'm glad you've got a game leg, Dave. Maybe you will be willing to sit down once in a while."

We sat down, still looking, still persistently smiling.

"May I sit on your lap," Ellena asked, "or would it hurt the damaged member?"

"It hasn't been subjected to lap-sitting yet," he said. "Maybe we'd better practice in private."

"Whoever heard of a general getting shot in the leg?" Gram said. "It's the back of your leg, of course, caught when you were running hell-bent away from some place you didn't care for."

Dave laughed. "I was so decimated they couldn't figure out whether I got it fore or aft. In fact, they suspect that I was spinning in circles like a top."

"Were you really shot, Dad?" Ellena asked soberly.

"I was really shot and very thoroughly shot. I can prove it."

"If you were shot, why weren't you hospitalized?" Gram asked sharply. "I was a nurse's aide in the last war, remember, and I know that all shots are hospitalized."

"So was I. And so were my shots. Very effectively hospitalized. I wasn't neglected, I assure you. The best was none too good for me. I got more than my share of plasma. I got the works."

"Does it hurt, Dad?" Ellena asked, paling slightly.

You see how easy it was for me. Just as always, when others were around to do the talking. I sat there and looked interested, as I had for twenty years.

"No, it doesn't hurt. How could it? It's artificial, you know. Not a peg leg. Mine is rubber, pretty pink rubber. With dimples. I'm thinking of having the other one lopped off too, to make it a pair. My original set was efficient enough, but no dimples to speak of."

The room was ringingly hushed.

Before the silence became unbearable, he glanced across at Cliff. "You're looking pretty much all right," he said. "My Furies here must be doing well by you."

"Sir," Cliff said awkwardly, "did . . . you say artificial? Do you mean you lost a leg?"

"That's right." Dave was quite cheerful about it. "Lucky I didn't lose the rest of me into the bargain. So they slipped me this pink gadget. I'm sorry the location is such that I can't show it off in public. They say once you get used to handling them, you can get around as slick as the devil. They gave me their word of honor I would soon be rug-cutting. That will be an achievement. I never could do it before."

Ellena went over and sat on the arm of his chair. "Dad," she said, "do you mean your leg was shot off and you didn't tell us? Why, Dad? Why didn't you tell us?"

He pulled her off the arm of the chair around onto his lap. "I didn't tell you in the first place, because they thought maybe I would die. There was no use to tell you maybe I was going to die, because if it turned out I didn't, you would have had all the worry for nothing. And if I died, you would have plenty of time to do your worrying afterward. Then when the leg was gone and I got this bathing beauty in its place, I thought there was no sense in worrying you in advance. Because the things we don't see and aren't quite sure of always hurt worse than the fact itself. So I decided just to come along home and exhibit my work of art in person."

"Will you kindly tell me," Gram said coldly and her lids were up now and her eyes warm and friendly, "what kind of a lousy administration this is, not to notify us that you were temporarily incapacitated?"

"I pulled a little rank. It's the only thing I ever got out of my stars and I figured it was worth it."

It was a shock. The worst shock of my life. Not because he had been near death, not that he had lost a leg, but that suddenly, in those few minutes, all the things I had known and believed and counted on were torn loose from under me. Not one word of his letters had surprised me. I had anticipated every sentence, even to the punctuation. Now suddenly I felt, with horror, that maybe all

through our life together things had been happening to him, important things, terrible things, beautiful things, and he had not mentioned them. I could have sworn that I knew in advance his every thought. Now I knew nothing.

He was talking to Cliff. "No, medically I am perfectly fit. I'll loaf around awhile and probably go back to the old job in New York. There will be changes and readjustments. No hurry. Nothing to worry about. Everything is just the same except that I can't invite guests up to see my artwork."

"Dave," Gram said, "do you know the smartest thing Eileen ever did? It was when she tricked you into eloping with her. If I had picked you out myself I couldn't have done a better job."

"Thanks, Duchess. If you mean it as a compliment."

"That is exactly how I mean it," she admitted grandly.

We had cocktails and then dinner. Dave and Cliff did most of the talking. Cliff looked at Dave with more than the respect due two stars from two bars. He looked at him as if he were looking up, not to insignia, but to a man. Ellena dabbed her eyes pretty often and could not eat, but she did not cry. She had plenty of spunk but she did not regain her color.

When we went upstairs, Cliff carried Dave's bags. "Sir," he said, "you—somehow you seem to represent everything I wanted to respect in the Army, and I came home not quite respecting it. And now all of a sudden, you make me respect it—and the country too. The things that burned me up seem very petty. I hope you are going to like me, sir."

"Cliff," Dave said, in his quiet, friendly voice, "have you forgotten that it was the Duchess and I who picked you out and threw Ellena into your arms? We saw what was in you and made a grab for it."

"Thank you, sir. I haven't seen anything in me yet, but keep working on me."

He lifted a bag to the luggage rack and opened it. "May I unpack your things, sir?"

"I'll do it, Cliff. That's been my chore for years," I said quickly.

"Do you need any help, sir? I'd be very glad to stay with you if I can do anything. Eileen could go down with Ellena . . ."

"Thanks, Cliff, if I need help I'll shout for it. I get along very well. That's what kept me away so long, practicing up on the damned thing. I finally got the hang of it."

Ellena kissed him again, still dabbing at her eyes with stiff little fingers, and went away with Cliff.

Gram came to the door. "We may as well draw cuts to see who rates the bathroom first," she said. "If anybody had told me that, at my present indeterminate age, I would be reduced to taking turns at a bath!"

Dave looked mildly surprised. "What's the matter? Other bathroom out of order? I've heard repairs are hard to get."

She curled a sensitive nostril delicately. "The other bath is now part of the dovecot. I have been harried from roost to roost. I will try to share considerably with you, but I warn you that my complexion takes more time than formerly."

"How are the mighty fallen!" Dave ejaculated. "And serves them right, too, serves them damn well right."

3

So we were alone.

I was calm but frightened. I thanked God for the bags to give me brief occupation.

"All I have to do," I reminded myself, "is keep on smiling and making interested ejaculations now and then. That's all he expects. It's very simple. He would drop dead if I tried to make love to him."

"I know it was something of a shock, Eileen," he said. "About the leg, I mean. But I still think it would have been worse for you to hear it when I was so far away and nobody here to help laugh it off. Everything seems more deadly at long range."

"I think you should have told me," I said.

"Maybe. But I couldn't see it then. I still don't see it. But maybe. I'm not always so sure I'm right as I used to be."

He prepared for bed, slowly.

"The children seem normally maudlin," he remarked. "I was afraid from your letters that maybe things were slightly on the rocks with them."

"All straightened out, I think, and smooth sailing at present. He's a nice boy. I like him."

"Yes. He's all right. Have you been hearing from His Excellency?"

"Once in a while, not often. He never writes anything but amusing chitchat anyhow."

"He's been writing to me very regularly. He gets a great kick out of my legless estate. He says he realizes he will have to be legs and ears and eyes and heart—I believe he included stomach—for all us disabled veterans."

"Do you mean you told Father when you didn't tell us?"

"Yes. Why not? I knew nothing would shock him. I think he enjoyed it. He says it proves what he always knew, that he's a better man than I am."

He got into bed. I went over and sat on the edge of it.

"It's all been very tough, Eileen. It's been plenty of hell for everybody. But it's all over now. Don't worry. Everything's all right. I suppose I'm lucky at that, having one foot literally in heaven, like a salesman with a toe in the crack of the door. Don't worry. Hop into bed and get a good rest. You need it."

I kissed him, turned out the lights and got into bed. "Dave," I said, "Ellena is going to have a baby."

He did not answer. I waited awhile. "Dave, did you hear me? Ellena is going to have a baby."

Still silence. "Dave, are you asleep?"

"No."

"Did you hear me?"

"Yes."

"What do you think of it?"

"Why, I think . . . I think it is very nice, Eileen. Very nice. It ought to do a lot of good."

"Ellena?"

"Perhaps. But I was thinking of Cliff. It ought to be a big help."

"Why?"

"To bring him back to reality. It seems very contradictory. But over there, everything was nightmarish and strange and hellish—like a bad dream. And everybody thought of home, places they'd

been, people they'd known, things they had done—those were reality. They stood out in memory, clear-cut, vivid, something solid to tie to. And then, on the way back, home seems unreal and strange and dreamlike and only the foul memory of war seems tangible and real. It's hard, getting back to balance. A baby ought to be a big help. There's nothing dreamlike or phantasmagoric about a baby."

"Are you tired, Dave?"

"No. . . . Yes, perhaps a little. But nothing to worry about. . . . Good night, Eileen."

IX. THE GENERAL

1

WELL, I put it across. Even the Duchess fell for it. She was all black-browed suspicion to begin with but I talked her out of it. It didn't really matter what she thought. It was Eileen I was talking to. And yet I was enraged at Eileen. She had no business letting me come home to face the music. I had made it easy for her to get out from under while I was away and she had deliberately waited for my return. That was pretty low-down.

I wasn't ordered overseas. I asked for it and had to pull plenty of wires to get it. It wasn't that I was so eager about fighting it out at the front, either. I went to make it easy for her and she had reciprocated by making it as tough for me as possible. I had seen it coming, the change in Eileen, for several years. I knew that woman like a book. It didn't upset me greatly when I realized that she was chafing at the domestic bit.

Personally I was satisfied with our marriage. It seemed to me that ours was all that could reasonably be expected of married life. But she came of an unreasonable family, though the symptoms in her were slow to develop. I had no wild feeling of outraged love and smoldering passion. I was just satisfied. Any reasonable woman would have been satisfied. It was hard to remember that some twenty years back I had been the precocious young ass who talked her into eloping.

I didn't even approve of eloping. But I was fed up with the war, the first war that is, and everything I wanted I went after in a hurry. I wanted Eileen and when she said her parents wouldn't hear of such a thing, I said, "The hell with them! We'll elope and show them a thing or two." And so we did.

When I realized that Eileen wanted to get away from me, I was irritated but I wasn't heartbroken. I thought she was a fool. But I

was willing to humor her. The Duchess unwittingly set me a good example. If she could take it, by God, I could. If she could make it easy and dignified for His Excellency to break away, I would deal as magnanimously with Eileen.

I left everything in perfect shape for her, power of attorney, allotments, financial independence. I advised her to sell the house in Orange and bank the money. I kept absolutely no strings on her.

While I was gone, that was the news I expected in every letter. "This is the works," I would remind myself when the mail came. And as proof of my philosophical acceptance, I let the letters stand unopened on my desk for several hours. Every letter, all those months, I expected it and didn't get it. Finally I figured it out.

All this tripe about not letting your men down while they are fighting and dying for you had gone to her head. As long as I was fighting and dying, she would stick it out.

When I lost the leg, I laid low. It took a lot of scheming but I was up to it. I wasn't going to let pity stand in her way. If I died, so much the better; it would save the expense of a divorce. I didn't die. But women always find things to pity, they go out of their way looking for them—a headache, indigestion, sand in your eye, an artificial leg—all very pitiful. So I said nothing. I wouldn't let pity hold her.

I was surprised when I began getting onto what was up with Bob Vandermere. I had never figured on another man. Eileen didn't seem the type for that. I got the first hint from her own letters. She wrote about him at length, amusingly, for a while and I was glad he was there to help pass away the time and take her out. Then she stopped mentioning him. When I asked about him she said briefly, "He's still in town. I see him sometimes." But I knew from Ellena and the Duchess that they were seeing plenty of him. I heard it from others too, loving friends, who sent along bits of news to "cheer me up." And clippings from newspapers: "Mrs. David Courtney, very beautiful in an orchid and blue creation, was there with Bob Vandermere." "Mrs. David Courtney, tea-dancing with Bob Vandermere." A society snapshot of a cocktail lounge: "Mrs. David Courtney and Bob Vandermere among those present."

Another man in the running gave it an uglier slant. But not much. And nothing against Van. I liked him.

I had to go home eventually. There was Ellena. There was the Duchess. And there was still Eileen. I practiced with the damned adjustments until I could manage tolerably. I lay under sun lamps to develop a healthy flush. I took exercises, ate strengthening foods, drank tonic. . . . No pity! She could have her divorce and Van, too, if she wanted him, but damn it, no pity!

I lied about the job. The company had been reorganized and if there was any place at all for me, it was not the one I had filled before. I was not sure of anything. But I put that across, too. And there was enough money to carry us all along for quite a while.

I felt like a fool when we were alone that night. She didn't say much but her brief remarks seemed pointed, almost barbed. I warned myself to be careful. I pretended to go to sleep.

A long time later, Eileen got up quietly and pulled a robe around her. She sat motionless in a chair by the window, watching the lights on the boulevard half a block away.

For the first time I wondered, "What the devil is she thinking about?"

I had always read her like an open book. I knew what she was going to say before she opened her mouth. But that night, for the first time, the covers of the book were closed against me. Maybe, I thought, there always had been a few closed pages, sealed off by themselves out of range of prying eyes. Maybe she is thinking of Van.

But I did not say anything. I had tried to make it easy for her to make the break and she had not risen to the easy out. Now I had returned and it would have to come the hard way. But it was up to her. She could pick her own time and place. I could take it.

She returned to bed along toward daybreak and I suppose we both went to sleep. I did not feel sad. But alert. Alert and watchful.

The days slipped along easily. Cliff was a great help. Asking boyish questions, beaming at me, soliciting my advice both on details for his discharge and overtures to prospective engineering jobs. For the "murmur" was still in his heart and his nerves, though definitely mending, were not yet normal.

I was sage and fatherly with him. I answered him in thoughtful words, myself at the same time knowing nothing; as much up against a stone wall as he was. More against it, for he had his wife and was going to have a baby. I had nothing.

Eileen surprised me again, suddenly. She wrote up to our tenants giving them the required three months' notice to vacate the premises. That was a real jolt. I had not expected to return to our own house. It would drive me to a good deal of double dealing, having no job ready to step into but obliged to catch commuter trains and put in the regular hours of a working day. And alone there with Eileen. I couldn't for the life of me figure her out.

I could have sworn that things with us were just as they had been for twenty years, and that Eileen was not changed. Except that I knew better. Marking time—that's all she was doing. But time for what? Ellena's baby? But what difference would a grandchild make?

X. ELLENA

1

THINGS went along swimmingly for several weeks. Cliff got his final discharge and was busy dickering for an engineering connection out west, preferring to be near home for a while, to buck his family up with moral support when young Bob went off for his institutional training. So there was always something going on in the house, letters to write, telegrams to send, plans to make, and, as always, never any dearth of things to talk about. So there was no monotony in the passing days.

Mother was doing a perfect job. I wouldn't have dreamed she had it in her. Perhaps she had always been more of a dissembler than I suspected. But if I had not known what she was up to, had not myself heard her avowed intention about Van and Dad, no suspicion would have entered my mind. She seemed so exactly what she had always been. No wonder that Dad, poor, dear, dumb dope, was completely taken in.

He was being particularly nice, and I was sure that by the time the two years were over, Van would be no more than a vague, unpleasant memory in our lives. But I was firmly resolved that after her gallant effort and her loyal adherence to our agreement, if in the end she wanted Van and not Dad, I, for one, would not so much as raise a protesting finger. Our bargain implied that.

We were having tea and highballs in the living room one afternoon, quiet, comfortable, a picture of serene American home life, when a car pulled up to the curb.

Mother, sitting nearest the window, turned her head and glanced out. Her face went suddenly white. "Mother!" she said faintly. "Dave! Look! . . . It's . . . Look!"

Naturally we scrambled to the windows. His Excellency was stepping jauntily out of an impressive limousine, a liveried footman holding the door for him. The footman drew out bag after bag,

boxes, brief cases, while His Excellency stood impatiently tapping his stick on the edge of the curb, watching attentively to make sure nothing was overlooked.

Not one of us spoke. We held our breath and looked.

The driver got down and assisted the footman with the luggage and His Excellency, satisfied at last, strutted ahead of them.

We hurried back to our seats and waited for Hortense to open the door. He gestured her back out of the way and admitted the men with the luggage.

"Hello, hello, hello!" he said cheerfully. "Just a minute now, don't rush me. Take the bags up, boys—the big bedroom at the head of the stairs. Just leave them in the center of the room. Be careful of those brief cases. Valuable papers. . . . Hello, Dave. Got a couple of spare dollars on you? I'm running short of change. . . . Hello, Duchess. Hello, Eileen. Well, Ellena! . . . Here you are, boys. Thanks very much. I'll call when I want you. . . . Well, Ellena, a nice trick to pull on your old gentlemen. . . . So this is your young man! How do you do, sir? Glad to meet you at the moment. If I turn up anything against you, you'll hear from me later. Anyhow, I admire your courage. A machine-gun nest is bagatelle compared to this Ellen-ridden roost. Well, Dave, how's the dimpled digit?"

He carefully put hat, stick and gloves on the hall table and dusted his hands gently, as if at the end of a rather tedious business.

"Well, as far as I am concerned," he announced cheerfully, "from this point on, it is their war. Let them have it. It's their peace, too. It's their hell on earth, ill will toward men. . . . Ellen, my dear, have you done something to your hair? It's much more platinum than usual. But quite becoming, my dear, quite becoming. . . . Well, here we are! No place like home! Who is serving the tea? No tea for me, thanks. Brandy, neat. I suppose like everybody else you are having servant problems."

I flew out for the brandy. Usually Cliff tagged along with me, ostensibly to help, but this time he did not even see me go. He was spellbound. We were all spellbound. I hated leaving, too, so I grabbed the bottle and flew back.

His Excellency had appropriated the most comfortable chair, in-

nocently unseating poor Dad to whom by common consent we had carefully accorded it.

"As for our bet about the rug-cutting, Dave," he said, sipping his brandy, "you may as well pay me. I have had no less a one than Argentina teaching me the latest wrinkles. . . . I hope you are not short of ration points, Ellen. Mine always manage to get themselves mislaid. . . . Ellena, you are putting on weight. Remember my motto, child. A figure lost is Paradise never regained. . . . So your name is Cliff. . . . And as for your Dean Flatbush I never heard of him in my life, Ellen, and you never did either. He sounds to me like one of those things you pick up out of thin air in your more erratic moments. . . . She always was a liar," he confided to the rest of us pleasantly, "but in a nice way. I always said I would rather be married to an interesting hellcat than a good bore. But she shouldn't cook up friendships with anything as respectable as college deans. They are almost like preachers. Sanctified, or words to that effect. . . . Eileen, I used to think you took life too sweetly, but is there any reason you should sit there suddenly making grimaces at it? . . . I hope you aren't having chicken for dinner. I am so thoroughly chickened I am virtually cooped. I have some very choice cheese. And some superior brandy. Brandy with cheese on toasted crackers. Are crackers rationed?"

"Are you staying for dinner?" Gram inquired quietly, breaking what appeared to be an endless chain of words.

I hadn't looked at her before. I had been too completely fascinated looking at His Excellency. She was sitting erect and motionless, her hands clasped loosely in her lap. Her eyes were wide and untroubled, her lips faintly curved as if she could laugh if it were a less solemn occasion. Serenity in the flesh.

"But of course!" ejaculated His Excellency. "As I told you, as far as I am concerned, their war is over. My war is over. Home they brought her warrior alive and kicking."

I wanted to scream with laughter. You couldn't help loving the old fraud. I could see that Cliff, though spellbound, was slightly aghast. Dad beamed with pleasure. I didn't dare look at Mother; there would be no repressing laughter should we share glances.

Still the Duchess sat there. No nervous movements of her feet.

No toying with chains or fingering ruffles. If the doctors keep on doing such marvelous things to keep people on earth, I may live a thousand years but I shall never know another hour of such ecstatic, topsy-turvy, hilarious inner tumult as I felt then. Maybe it was the baby.

We went out to dinner. Six places had been laid. Since Dad came home, he had been sitting at the head of the table and Gram had relinquished her place to Mother—for better balance, she said—and also as an acknowledgment that Dad was paying the bills. Cliff and I had places on the left and Gram the right side alone.

His Excellency marched to his usual place at the head of the table. Cliff and I slid quickly by to our chairs. Mother hesitated briefly and then stood by the chair on His Excellency's right. Dad came in with Gram. She stood stock-still for a moment, then walked quietly down to the foot of the table. Cliff and Dad stood attentively, one on either side, and seated her with a little more than ordinary ostentation. Really, she could rise to anything.

Mother and I dared one glance at each other and immediately our eyes, her eyes and mine, were suffused with a mixture of tears and laughter. I moved my foot over to Cliff's and pressed hard against it. He did not understand what was going on but I had to touch him.

When Hortense came in to remove the sherbet glasses, disapproval in every line of her face—she adored Gram—His Excellency got up from his chair, put his hands gently on her shoulders and kissed her on the forehead. "Welcome home, my child!" he said.

His Excellency was in wonderful form. I doubt if anyone in the world has enjoyed a more exciting meal; I am sure none of us ever had. Dad, always a perfect foil for His Excellency, was equal to the occasion. Cliff fell readily in line. It was hardly noticed that there were three half-suffocated females at the table, unable to swallow a mouthful of food, hardly capable of speaking when spoken to.

Grandfather was the center of such gay attention that I seldom took my eyes off him long enough to glance down the table toward Gram. When I did, I noticed that her right hand was lying upturned on the table beside her plate and that Dad's hand was covering it closely. He was a swell person, Dad.

2

When we had finished coffee in the living room, Gram said, "Please excuse me a few minutes. I'd better have a look at the rooms."

Mother was on the alert. "I'll help you, Duchess."

When they started upstairs, I was unable to restrain myself. I had to know what was going to be said up there. "If there's any heavy shifting to be done, they will require my muscles," I said brightly, heading for the stairs.

"Can I help?" Cliff offered politely.

"Oh no, thanks. We're extremely proficient. We've had so much practice."

I shot up the stairs and just in time. They were standing in the bridal suite, perfectly silent, motionless, staring down at His Excellency's impressive array of excellent luggage.

"I'll sleep on the couch, Gram," I offered breathlessly. "I did it once before and it was all right. Cliff can take the little room, you and Mother can come in here, and Grandfather and Dad will take the twin beds."

She gave me a hard, straight look. "I might have known I would be driven to the attic before this war is over," she said. "Come on. He can take the little room and like it and if anybody wants to put sand on the sheets or mice under the pillow, I shall try to stand it with my usual equanimity."

"We might have known this would happen," Mother said helplessly. "We should have been prepared for it. It is so like him—so exactly like him!"

I threw myself on the bed, helpless with laughter. Mother sat down beside me. We put our arms around each other and tried to stifle our convulsions.

Gram closed the door. "He's not going to get away with this," she declared grimly. "He's got away with everything else in the world. All his life. But not this! I am not going to be compromised at my age."

Mother and I were still rocking with laughter. It was so like him! But you couldn't help loving the idiot.

"Come on, girls, snap out of it," Gram said. "Driven to the attic! At my age!"

"Your age is inconsequential, darling," I managed to say. "How about sending Cliff to the attic?"

"Certainly not. . . . If he thinks for one minute he is going to get my bed, the best bed in the house, he's crazy. No, I'll take the attic. Come on, help me lug up the bedding."

Mother and I pulled ourselves together, snickering irrepressibly. Gram got out fresh linens, blankets and pillows, parceled them out among us, and we repaired to the attic.

The maid's room had not been used since the advent of Hortense's draft-dodging baby but it was all right. I opened the windows; Mother began mopping up dust; Gram made the bed. Then we went down to the little room and remade the bed there, and came up again with fresh towels and essential cosmetics and night clothes.

"He can drape his wardrobe over the chairs or stick it under the mattress," Gram said. "He isn't going to get away with this! It is only for one night!"

Mother winked at me and we went off into fresh gales of laughter. In a way it served Gram right, with her high and mighty airs and her elegantly phrased moral principles.

"I hope you are not forgetting, Duchess," Mother reminded her slyly, "that the poor dear has been waging war on the diplomatic front, risking his morals and digestion in foreign courts. It seems to me he is entitled to two years of recompense. . . . Time, Duchess, just a little time. . . . Time to make his readjustment and reaccustom his stomach to sordid American chow. . . . At least two years. . . . Shouldn't you think so, Ellena?"

"Oh, at least two years," I said, as well as I could for laughing. "Think of the price he has paid. Why, he might have died of acute gastritis! He might have had a stroke! I've almost got a stroke myself. . . . Yes, at least two years."

Gram laughed grudgingly. "Yes, we might have expected it," she admitted. "It's more like him than any other damn fool thing he ever did in his life."

"He's going to raise the roof about sleeping in the little room and taking turns at the bath with Dave and me," Mother said.

"Be a good sport, Eileen," Gram begged her. "Monopolize the bathroom all you can. Burst a blood vessel if you have to. Keep him standing in line for hours!"

We went down to the living room again. Things were not going so hilariously. His Excellency always reserved his best stories until Gram was among those present. The men were moving to come upstairs.

"I've got a few things they want to see," His Excellency explained, "a few trifling souvenirs—odd things I picked up."

"If it is one of Hitler's buttons we aren't interested," Gram said. "They have already shown them in a movie."

Grandfather stopped in the door of the bridal suite and looked aristocratically outraged. "Where did all this junk come from?" he demanded petulantly, referring to the furnishings. "Chuck it out of here. You'd think the place had been roboted. Hortense! Call Hortense!"

"Hortense has gone home. This is the bridal suite and eventually will be the nursery. You can move your luggage down to the little room. The rest of the house is occupied."

"But I always sleep here!" he protested.

"Not any more! If, as seems apparent, you plan to spend the night as our guest, you will naturally use the only room available. Your trash must be removed at once from the bridal-nursery."

Cliff and Dad lent willing hands with the luggage, and Mother and I helped with lighter pieces. His Excellency proceeded down the hall and turned into the big guest room.

"Your shelter-half is over here," Gram informed him.

He looked at it askance. His luggage overflowed everything—tables, chairs and desk; corners were stacked high. "Where do you expect me to dispose my things?" he asked testily.

"I don't expect you to dispose them. Where did you dispose them in the foxholes to which you are conversationally so well accustomed?"

"Oh, well, anything in a pinch," he said cheerfully. "We mustn't forget there is a war on. We can make our readjustments tomorrow."

But he was disconcerted. He did not offer to open his bags and

display his accumulated trophies. We went downstairs, had fresh coffee, and the flow of talk proceeded. I sat beside Cliff clinging joyously to his hand. "This—this really is the pay-off!" I chortled wickedly to myself. "She never can talk herself out of this one! Her own words bind her to a two-year mortgage."

Mother and I could not meet each other's eyes. Even Dad had trouble repressing his amusement. Cliff was nonplussed but still spellbound. We were disappointed when Gram rose suddenly, remarking, "Ellena, you and I, for different reasons, must keep more regular hours. If the rest of you will excuse us . . ."

They all rose and we moved slowly upstairs. His Excellency looked politely perturbed but passed it off without comment. We went to our rooms and closed our various doors. I had a lovely view of Gram thumbing her nose at the corridor as she retired to the attic.

I flung myself on the best bed in the house and stifled my laughter with a pillow. Cliff thought I was having hysterics and sat down beside me, patting me soothingly. It set me off worse than ever.

"He's really quite a character, isn't he?" he said pacifically. "I don't wonder you missed him. I had no idea——"

"Darling, darling, darling!" I gasped. "Promise me, oh, promise me, that when we have been married forty years you will desert me for a younger, fairer face and then come back and compromise me. Promise, darling—you have to promise! Otherwise my life will have been lived in vain!"

Cliff laughed uncertainly. We had told him as little as possible about His Excellency—just that he had gone senilely off the beam in his doddering old age. Now, between what I hoped were fairly ladylike guffaws and getting ready for bed, I managed to deliver the epitome of the tragic and ludicrous what's-what.

"And now let me tuck you into your bed, darling," I said. "Go to sleep, like Mommy's nice little boy. I've got to beat it up to the attic and see how the Duchess comports herself in the maid's dusty room."

"Let me go with you," he said eagerly.

"No, darling. The things she is going to say are not for your refined young ears. We keep our choice profanity for our better caloric sex. If it is as good as I think it's going to be, I'll wake you up and retail the more proper items."

I hurried out, and almost ran into Mother sneaking down the dark hall.

We went up the attic stairs, snickering, holding hands. The Duchess was sitting bolt upright in the maid's bed, propped against the fourth best set of pillows in the house, smoking a cigarette.

"I expected you," she said without preamble. "I don't know why you both aren't earning good money snooping around for some lousy newspaper—you're both so damned nosy."

We sat down on opposite sides of the foot of the bed and smiled at her.

"Two years at your age is less than nothing, Duchess," Mother said pleasantly. "Surely you are not unwilling to give him two years in return for the hell he's gone through, telling diplomatic lies solely for you! Not for our nation's sake, not for the Constitution and the Bill of Rights! Remember, soldiers die and diplomats lie only for the little women they left behind."

Gram took it with admirable calmness. "Very well," she said. "I am willing to eat my words. Usually I find my own words more digestible than those of other people I could mention. Two years? Very well. I will give him two years."

"You can hardly incarcerate yourself in the attic for two years," I reminded her. "Cliff and I are going to be shoving off pretty soon."

"I will give him two years," she repeated quietly. "But I will administer them in my own way."

"Your way, beloved, is apt to be pretty drastic," Mother objected. "After all the foreign delicacies he is accustomed to, ground glass and poison gas will wreak havoc with his digestive tracts."

"Did I offer any suggestions or interpose any objections when you two took over your two-year terms? I hope you will show me the same consideration."

"Gram, do you mean you really will try him out for two years?" I asked unbelievably.

"Yes. Two years. Ten, if necessary. But in my own way, on my own terms, and with no back talk from either of you."

"Do you think we should accept these terms of armistice?" Mother asked, turning to me.

"Unconditional surrender is what she asked of us," I said stoutly.

"It was a mighty soft peace you got, both of you," she said hotly. "You've got them both eating out of your hands. But I will stick to my own terms—he can have two years. But remember this," she said more soberly. "It is not the same as with you. He came home, yes, just like the others. But he thinks coming home means to a house. Coming home doesn't mean to a place; it means to people; it means to a person. Remember that. Now kindly go away and let me sleep and dream of dear dead days beyond recall when we had a maid here and I was tucked away in the best bed in the house. Good night."

We rose at once. "Do we understand you correctly, Duchess? That you really are going to stick to your own terms and give him two years of—shall we say grace?"

"Yes." The reply was not faltering. "But in my own way. Home is not a house; it's people; it's a person."

Mother and I hugged each other all the way downstairs. She kissed me at the door of the bridal-nursery suite.

"Good night, Ellena," she whispered. "We were frightfully dumb not to have been prepared for this. He couldn't help doing the thing that nobody else under heaven would dream of doing."

3

Everything went off nicely the next day. Gram cracked down on Hortense. She said that with our present household we needed help; Hortense could either drown her war child or resign. Hortense got somebody to look after the infant and came in around eleven in time to prepare luncheon. Breakfast had always been hit-or-miss in the household. Rather private. One could get up when one felt like it, chivvy oneself down to the kitchen and forage for whatever suited one's taste. G. B. P. had grapefruit or melon and black coffee. The rule had always been that the first one to hear him moving about was honor-bound to shoot upstairs with them.

I looked forward to being on tap that first morning but evidently the cubbyhole had not entirely agreed with him because he was in the kitchen ahead of all of us, frowning into the cupboards because

they contained jars of concentrated things that he considered poisonous to an epicurean taste.

Dad and Cliff were lovely to Gram all day. They hung over her and waited on her and passed her things until Mother and I had trouble to keep from laughing in their faces. They were trying to show His Excellency how much they admired her and what a grand little old lady she was at heart, in spite of her impudent tongue.

Cliff was uneasy. As soon as he could get hold of me alone—and that was difficult because I persistently remained within earshot of anything worth hearing and everything was—he said, “Ellena, we must get a room somewhere away from here. We can’t let your grandmother be stuck up there in the attic. Your grandfather hasn’t the faintest notion of moving on. She looks very tired. She probably didn’t sleep a wink.”

“She’s thinking,” I said soothingly, for wild horses couldn’t have dragged me away at that point. “Thinking always wears her down to tags and tatters. She’s groping for inspiration.”

“She looks to me as if she has been thinking too much already,” he persisted. “And I certainly wouldn’t trust any inspiration she got hold of right now. It’s a crime to drive her off to the attic.”

“The attic is part of the act,” I said, trying to calm him. “Cliff, please conserve your innate anxieties for the benefit of future little Lindleys. I assure you my ancestors can bury their own bones and eat them, too.”

Mother and I, in hurried, private whispers, agreed that Gram appeared all set to abide by her own terms and give the undeserving but lovable brute two years of grace. She said Dad was worried. He thought it was piling things up on her pretty thick. And Mother couldn’t tell him about the two-year racket because that involved him and he would never understand it.

Still the day went along very smoothly. Mother and I literally hounded our husbands to bed that night so we could beat a hot trail to the attic for another matronly rendezvous in the maid’s room.

We shook hands with the Duchess and congratulated her. We said she was carrying things off admirably and we were proud of her.

She seemed a little preoccupied. “Yes, I suppose so,” she assented

vaguely. "I will celebrate the bicentennial or whatever you call it. But I have to run it to suit myself. You did. And you did very well. I am proud of you too, both of you, though you have made yourselves as obnoxious as possible these last two days. But don't forget: there's no such thing as coming home to a house. Now kindly leave me." Then she added almost dreamily, "Do you remember Grace, the maid I had before Hortense? A good maid but foolish. It was a mistake for her to get married and go off with a husband and leave me. I always treated her well but her husband got drunk and stuck a knife in her. A rusty knife. There are people much harder to live with than I am. Good night, girls."

I had to see Grandfather alone for a minute and it was virtually impossible. Audiences, domestic or public, gravitated to him so naturally. But I remembered his grapefruit and coffee. I was in the kitchen, waiting, before daybreak. At the click of the bathroom door I was on my way, tray in hand.

I remember wondering if he recalled other mornings, when sometimes we had rather shunned him. For insouciance before breakfast is hard to take unless you are designed that way.

He took the tray gratefully. "I am glad you are going to have a baby, Ellena," he said. "I approve of babies—though it has always seemed to me that a Providence of such Infinite Wisdom could have planned it some way without playing hob with nice figures. Not that I mean to be critical. On the whole, I approve of Providence. Both Providence and babies. But if you do not mind my speaking frankly, may I say that I wish you would have it somewhere outside my room? I am willing to make concessions to wind up the war and win the peace, but I hope you and Cliff will remember that the use of my room is strictly lend-lease and not permanent."

I laughed. "Don't worry, darling. Cliff has landed a job back in his precious Iowa and we are on our way out almost immediately."

"I should be sorry to see you go, except that I am getting bored with this foxhole. I like your young man. I expect to exert a beneficial and, shall we say, softening influence on him. Suavity in husbands is the root of domestic contentment. I shall look forward to seeing more of him. But in the circumstances, the sooner he departs

the better. He apparently is dead set on spoiling the Duchess and she spoils easily."

"Grandfather," I said, "do you mind if I ask you a personal question?"

"Not at all, my child," he said pleasantly. "If it is something I prefer not to answer, I shall lie like a gentleman. Or, better still, like the Duchess. But you are at perfect liberty to make inquiry."

"Why did you want a divorce from Gram?"

"I didn't want a divorce from Gram. I did not want a divorce from anybody. I approve of divorces for everybody except myself. In my own case, I consider a divorce an aspersion on my impeccable good taste, which I resent."

"Then, Grandfather," I went on, "how did it happen?"

"It happened," he said frankly, "that we were in the midst of an acrimonious discussion one night and I remarked that what we needed was a divorce. I went farther. I said if we had been divorced after some ten years of married bliss, I should have gone to my grave considering her the most delightful episode of my eventful life. I am afraid I added, more tempestuously than I should, that forty years was entirely too much of a thing that wasn't quite good enough."

"Was that all?"

"Wasn't it enough? But to my surprise, she took my remarks literally. Then I thought it might have a helpful disciplinary effect to let her go ahead with it, right up to the stopping-off point. She disappointed me bitterly. She did not stop at the stopping-off point. She took the hurdle."

"Wasn't it some stenographer?" I asked, rather dazed.

"Stenographer! What stenographer?"

"Any stenographer. Everybody says that men your age are terribly susceptible to stenographers. Stenographers and nurses. I pray to heaven Cliff never gets sick enough to need a nurse or important enough to rate a private secretary."

He regarded me speculatively. "That, my child, is a most interesting observation. It smacks of feline philosophy and mediocre morals. My personal experience is slight, but I consider that nurses are nurses, God's gift to the sick and wounded. Stenographers are

stenographers and may heaven lend a hand with their spelling. A man's woman is his wife. I trust you do not consider me completely *déclassé*."

"Grandfather, how is it possible for anybody to disapprove so wholeheartedly of everything about a man and yet love him so much and be so glad to see him?"

"Because they are synonymous, my child. When a woman quits disapproving of a man, her love has taken wings."

His Excellency did not come down until almost luncheon time. The rest of us wandered around, marking time, waiting. By the rest of us I mean Mother and Dad, Cliff and me. The Duchess was still out of sight and none of us blamed her for that. I hoped, and I am sure the others were hoping, she would be fifteen minutes or so late, by way of showing His Excellency that his thumb was less heavy than formerly.

Hortense was right on the dot. Luncheon at one. We went out, laughing and talking.

Grandfather noticed first. I was beside him and felt him lifting himself a little, his shoulders, his head. I did not see it until later but thinking back that is what I remember.

The table was set for five. No place was laid at the foot of the table. When I saw that, I remembered that I had neither seen nor heard her all that day. I suppose the others saw it when I did for we seated ourselves quietly, our laughter and chatter hushed.

"Hortense," Grandfather said quietly, "is Mrs. Dorchester indisposed? Isn't she coming down for luncheon?"

Hortense was frightened. Her eyes were heavy and red-rimmed. She twisted a corner of her apron nervously.

"Mista Do'ches'ta, Mis' Do'ches'ta, she tol' me she done got he'se'f a complete nu'vous breakdown. She say she goin' off somewheres an' get herse'f a good long res'. She tell me make you-all com'f'ble as can be and have yo'se'fs a good time while she's gettin' a good long res'. Somewhere."

His Excellency was really worthy of the Duchess. "Thank you, Hortense," he said. "It has been a long hard strain for her and she is entitled to the best. I am glad she had the good judgment to realize it."

He began buttering his hot roll—half butter, half oleo. Mother and I looked at each other straight in the eye. We were not afraid of laughing now. Our look was a tribute and a salute.

Cliff, sensing something gone wrong, slid his hand to my knee under the table and patted me comfortingly. I did not need comfort. I was thinking we were a pretty good set of females, after all. The Duchess at last was living up to her precepts and our example.

Grandfather did his best. Dad, too, tried to rally to it. Cliff, though bewildered, trying to follow the leader, helped most of all by presenting himself, a submissive, eager target. He asked questions, took ribbing.

So this was the way she had chosen. Right or wrong, Mother and I would back her up as she had backed us.

The female of the species would be devastatingly deadly except that usually it is one woman against another, each for herself. This time it wasn't. We women were a united front.

XI. THE GENERAL

1

I BEGAN to think I was making an ass of myself over something that did not exist. Maybe I was psychoneurotic. The doctors hadn't said so; it was not on my medical papers. Maybe I had a touch of gas. Nobody was supposed to be using gas in this most uncivilized of all wars, but there was gas. Gas in smoke screens. Gas in phosphorescent bombs. Gas in any bombs, for that matter.

Maybe the wild ideas I had been nurturing and despising in the back of my mind were mirages, gas mirages.

Eileen was the same. She had not changed. She was the same to Ellena, the same to me. The unexpected return of her father had been a shock but she had rallied to it, quietly, with her usual dignity. I went to the doctors for a checkup. They insisted that all my reactions were perfectly normal, my physical reactions that is; they did not know what was in my mind.

Questioned, they admitted that the shock of any such wound as mine might conceivably produce psychopathic results and frequently did but that I showed no symptoms of it. Yet the more I thought about it, the more evident it seemed. Doctors were fools. How could they discover the oncreeping of a mental fog?

We missed the Duchess. To me, her absconding merely confirmed what I had suspected from the first—that it was she who had wanted the divorce. I did not like the way they took it, Eileen and Ellena, with such calm, even smiling acceptance as if it pleased them. Most unnatural.

It was not so hard for Ellena. She had only one week of it and then she and Cliff went west. His Excellency hurried them as much as he could without outraging the spirit of hospitality. As soon as they had gone, he went to the bridal-nursery suite and stayed there awhile, alone. Then he returned quietly to the foxhole. There was no more beefing about his quarters. I stayed away from the house

as much as I could, for the air of dogged dreariness affected even His Excellency and Eileen didn't turn a hand to make good cheer.

I spent a good deal of time with other officers, some out of things because of health like me, others retired, many still active on desk jobs. At the Shoreham lounge one afternoon I saw Van. Bob Vandermere. He was sitting alone at a small table back in a corner. I excused myself to the men with me and walked slowly to where he sat. He was very drunk.

"Hello, Van," I said. "How are you? Haven't seen you for quite a while."

He started to rise but was so unsteady that I sat down quickly, to save him embarrassment. A little plan came suddenly into my mind: to be calm and dispassionate, entirely the man about town. Show off a little. I hadn't anything to hide, and nothing to skulk from.

"What are you having? Brandy? Good!" I motioned for the waiter and ordered more of the same.

"What did you come over here for?" he asked thickly.

"To talk to you. Why not? Haven't we always been friends? We've had good times together. We always had much in common."

He gave me a bleary, drunken look.

I lost my head a little. "Much in common then. More now. My wife, for instance."

"Are you trying to make something of it?" he asked angrily.

"No. Why should I? I like her, too. I'd rather despise the taste of anybody who didn't."

He took a long, slow swallow of brandy. "I'm sorry about it, Dave," he said. "I hate it like the devil. That it had to be your wife, I mean. I couldn't help it. I suppose this damned probation is as hellish for you as it is for me."

"Yes, hellish. But I've grown rather used to hell these last few years." I was thinking back, slowly, over what he had said. "Probation," I repeated. "What do you mean by this probation?"

"That's what I call it," he said. "Paying you back for winning the war. Trying us out to see where we stand. Probation I call it. Like joining some goddam church."

I can't explain what happened to me. It was instantaneous. Instantaneous madness. The cold detachment I had felt from the begin-

ning seemed to explode into fire. I could feel hot blood leap in my veins. My skin prickled and stung. Instantaneous madness.

"Probation," I repeated slowly, the word burning my lips.

"Didn't she tell you?"

"She didn't set a time limit," I said, speaking carefully.

"Two years," he said bitterly. "Don't ask me why. I don't know why. She just said she was going to give you two years. I don't know why the hell I had to fall in love with your wife. God knows I didn't want to. I didn't expect to. God knows——"

I shoved back my chair and went away. I forgot the check. I had to get away. I needed air. Air on my face. Air to beat down the fire inside me. I forgot the car. I struck off up the avenue. I walked several blocks.

"I can't go home. I mustn't go home," I told myself that over and over. "If I go home I'll kill her. The devil. That devil. I'll kill her with my bare hands. . . . Slow up, you fool. Get hold of yourself! . . . No woman is worth murder. . . . Slow up. Cool off. . . . I'll kill her. I mustn't go home."

Two years' probation! After all those years! Killing was too good for her.

I tried to remind myself that this was one of those things you had to take. Like blitzes and robots. But blitzes and robots were war. This was home. The sanctity of home. This was hell.

"I can't go home. I'll kill her. No woman is worth it."

I was in front of the Wardman. I went in on sudden impulse and asked for a room. They said they had no vacancies. I asked for the manager. The room clerk said he would fetch him immediately. I suppose he saw murder written all over me.

The manager bounded out of his office. "I'm sorry, General," he said nervously. "You know how things are. We're jammed to the doors."

"I want a room. I want it immediately."

"But, General——"

"Quickly," I said. "Quickly."

"Now I tell you, General, we've got a room but you won't like it. It isn't worthy of you and I'm ashamed to offer it, but——"

"Where is it?"

"I'll show you. It is inferior but if you take it temporarily we'll switch people around and get something better as soon as we can. It's really no more than a service——"

"Where is it?"

He got the keys and went up in the elevator with me, mumbling apologies, watching me warily. Murder. It was written all over me.

I was thinking fast.

I had to notify them at the house—the old man and that devil. I had to notify them or they would think my game leg had failed me and rout out the police to find me.

"I want you to make a telephone call for me," I said. I was standing in the center of the room. The manager hung cautiously close to the door.

"Yes, of course, General. Very glad to."

I gave him the number. "Ask for Mr. Dorchester. Don't speak to anybody else. Tell him to get the hell down here as fast as he can. Tell him I want him."

"Yes, of course, sir."

He put in the call, standing sideways at the telephone, his eyes on me. I did not move from the center of the room.

Hortense answered and he waited while she called His Excellency. Mr. Dorchester. A devil himself. The father of That Devil.

The manager was polite to abjectness. "Mr. Dorchester, sir," he said. "This is the Wardman Park Hotel speaking. Could you come down here as quickly as possible? And it is extremely confidential. Don't say a word to anybody. General Courtney wants to see you immediately. It's urgent, sir."

He sidled toward the door. "He says he will come immediately, sir."

"Send me up a bottle of brandy."

"Yes, of course, sir. Immediately."

He slid through the door and closed it behind him.

He would come immediately. Of course he would come immediately. He was glad of an excuse to get away from the house. He was bored as hell stuck there alone with Eileen and me. Stuck with Eileen from this on! For I was through. I was a hundred percent through.

The boy came up with brandy, glasses and ice. I tipped him, mechanically.

"Anything else, sir?"

"Nothing else."

When he had gone I opened the bottle, put ice in a glass, filled it with brandy. A full glass. I drank it and sat down.

I was sorry the Duchess was not there. She was a fool but when anything had to be done, she did it quickly. She co-operated. And she got what you were driving at without several volumes of explanatory notes. But she wasn't there. It was like the whole damned family. Always some place else just when they were needed.

The brandy, or maybe the ice, cooled me off a little. I figured it out carefully. I must not lose my head before the old man. That would give him just the chance he loved—to be calm and superior and put me in my place. I must be calm and superior myself and put him and his daughter and his whole damned family in their place. Dirt-low. That was their place. Dirt-low.

I poured more brandy over the ice in the glass.

His Excellency arrived in record time. He came up alone. I grinned understandingly at that. The manager had taken pains to meet him in person and explain that the poor old general had gone suddenly off the beam; to warn him to be wary.

He came in jauntily, swinging his stick. Emphasizing that he did not really need a stick, that he had two good legs to walk on. The stick was only an ornament with him. I saw through it. But I had myself well in hand by that time. I was going to out-Machiavelli the devil himself.

"Have a drink," I said cordially. "It's a great day in my life. I'm celebrating. The slaves are emancipated. The chains are unshackled. The grindstone is padded with velvet. I am by way of having a grand and glorious binge. How about teaming up?"

He tossed his hat, stick and gloves on the bed and pulled up a chair. I filled a glass for him.

"Here's freedom!" he said. But he barely tasted the liquor. "What's eating you, son?"

"Women. . . . A cigarette? . . . Women. All women in general

and all of yours in particular. Except Ellena. . . . But she's not yours."

"I agree with you absolutely. I not only defend to the death your right to say it, I say the same thing. Hellcats. All of them. . . . Is it anything in particular?"

The brandy had me ice-cold by that time, ice-cold, deliberate and fair-minded. Somehow I told him. I don't remember the words. But I was careful. I did not exaggerate. I did not use expletives for emphasis. But somehow, with matter-of-fact brevity, I told him.

"Not Eileen!" he said incredulously.

"Eileen! I didn't care about her leaving me. I didn't object to Van. But probation—goddam her soul!"

"You are absolutely right," he said. He sipped his brandy slowly, cautiously moderate. "I'm sorry. I thought our woman trouble was over. But you are absolutely right, Dave. We've got to teach these women a lesson they'll remember as long as they live. They've pulled us around by the nose long enough. Look at Ellen. Where is she? Who knows? I must say I am surprised at Eileen. I never dreamed she was taking after her mother. I always thought she was more like me. We've got to teach them a lesson. We'd better take a plane and go some place. Some far, romantic place where they would like to be themselves and can't get there."

"You don't have to start going places," I reminded him. "You're not stuck with anybody. As far as I can see, the Duchess has the edge on you. She started going first."

"That's so, too. That is a complication. We'll have to go in the opposite direction."

"We don't know which direction she went."

"That's so too." He brightened suddenly. "But at least we know where she didn't go! She didn't go where the war is because they wouldn't permit it. We'll have to get back in the war."

"We've got plenty of war right here," I said. "And how about my game leg?"

"Well, there are other places. Canada. Mexico. I wish we had Cliff here. He could go with us. Put Ellena in her place at the same time. Good company, too."

"Ellena's all right," I said angrily. "In my opinion she's the only one in your whole damned family that is all right."

"We might check with Cliff on that score just to make sure," His Excellency said slyly.

I poured more brandy over my ice but His Excellency was persistently moderate. He said he had to keep his wits about him. He had to figure our way out of this woman mess.

"We don't have to go any place at all," he decided finally. "This is our home and here we stay. And eventually this is where the Duchess will return. But we have to get Eileen out of the house. We've got to get shut of women, once and for all. We'll fire Hortense and get us a young Chinese to wait on us. Now how can we get Eileen out of the house?"

"We can't. Not for two years. She can't join the Vandermere church until the two years' probation is up."

"That's an idea," he said brightly. "Very clever of you. Van! We'll send Van! We'll have him tell her the probation deal is off and he can have her and welcome but she's got to go immediately because if she doesn't one of us is going to kill her and I would hate to be a—what is it they call fathers who murder their daughters? I'm a bit confused but I wouldn't want to be one. How can we get hold of this wife-stealer?"

I was drunk enough for it to sound plausible to me.

"You're right about that," I said. "If I go home I am going to kill her."

"And quite right, son," he agreed heartily. "Except that she happens to be my daughter and I would have to protect her. Besides, it would make me an accessory. I wouldn't stoop to being an accessory. No, we'll just get her out of the house. Much tidier. How can I get this Vandermere?"

"He was half under the table at the Shoreham when I saw him," I said.

His Excellency called the Shoreham and had him paged. But he had gone from there. I gave him the names of a few bars where men like Vandermere would be apt to drop in on their way to complete unconsciousness. He was not at any of them. His Excellency

got quite a kick out of the pursuit, and I took some drunken interest in it myself.

He interrupted his hunt long enough to call the house. He told Eileen that he and I were out on an important secret military mission and would not be home for dinner and in fact probably not that night. It didn't bother her any. Very likely she was glad of it. I interrupted the phoning long enough to call downstairs and order up another bottle of brandy and more cigarettes.

He finally got hold of Van just where he should have been, at home and in bed. His Excellency was extremely dignified.

"Mr. Vandermere? Perhaps you remember having met me in the remote but not remote enough past? I am Felix Dorchester, perhaps better known as Eileen's father."

I snickered over my glass at that crack. It must have been quite a jolt for the inebriated wife-snatcher.

"Thank you," His Excellency said with cold courtesy. "I am down at the Wardman Park with my son-in-law General Courtney. Perhaps you remember him. We would like to see you. Immediately, if you don't mind."

He paused briefly. "I see. Indisposition being synonymous with intoxication, I presume, as in most cases. Well, pull yourself together. Take a cold shower and a Bromo-Seltzer. We insist on seeing you. If you cannot come here we shall be happy to oblige you by going there."

A brief intermission. "That's quite all right, I assure you. We shall not mind waiting. We only insist on seeing you, somewhere, at the earliest possible moment. Sorry to inconvenience you. Thank you."

I smiled happily at him. "If he can get hold of a coat of mail, he'll be wearing it," I said. "He'll expect one of us to be throwing down the gauntlet. Probably, you, out of deference to the dimpled digit."

"In the meantime, son, suppose you pull yourself together a bit," he said briskly. "You should be slightly less maudlin than he is. It's too bad the Duchess isn't here. She gets such a kick out of other people's business."

He removed the bottle of brandy. He called room service and

ordered a pot of strong black coffee and asked for the dinner menu.

After coffee, he insisted that I have a bath, followed by cold running water. While I was in the tub I heard him giving the order for dinner to be served in the room and asking for evening papers.

Considerably to my surprise, I ate with good appetite. His Excellency was in fine fettle but I did not follow him closely. I was impatient. And I was vaguely worried. On soberer, or at least on less intoxicated, afterthought I was not at all sure we were off on the right tack. But nothing to be done about it now. I began watching my watch.

His Excellency was unperturbed. "He'll be here," he said confidently. "This is his rendezvous with destiny and it will take more than a passing binge to break it up. It reminds me of the time . . ."

It was around eight-thirty when Van came. He was diffident but wary. He was not going to be caught napping if he could help it, but he didn't like the setup.

His Excellency poured out a moderate drink for each of us and passed cigarettes. "Now not to waste time," he began, as briskly as if he were merely arranging a twenty or thirty-billion-dollar loan, "the long and short of it is this: the probation is off. The terms are not acceptable to my client. The treaty is null and void. The General and I feel that you are entitled to the privilege of breaking the good news to Eileen. She is at home. She is alone. You are at liberty to tell her that she is at liberty. Is that quite clear?"

"It isn't at all clear," Van said. "I don't like it. I think you've got something up your sleeve."

"Not at all," His Excellency said reassuringly. "The General and I are through with women. We plan to retire to some jungle fastness—preferably with a harem or two in the not remote distance, just for the sake of variety, you understand. We are going to spend the remainder of our lives meditating and cursing and making an intensive study of local pathological conditions. Does that make it clearer?"

"No, it doesn't," Van said doggedly. "It only fogs things up."

His Excellency tapped his forefinger on the table impatiently. "If you insist on words of one syllable, sir, I will try to accommodate you. The General is a man of action, a man of instantaneous deci-

sion. He repudiates the two-year truce. You may have her and welcome. But immediately."

"But it can't be immediate. She hasn't got the divorce."

"Let her get it. Let her go quickly and get it. The point is that she must go immediately. Tonight. We do not care to see her. You probably know some nice place where you can take her. We will have Hortense pack and remove such belongings as she may leave behind. She is to go, and immediately. Have I been sufficiently succinct for your somewhat befuddled intelligence?"

"I don't get it," Van said doggedly. "I somehow get the impression, Dave, that everything is okay with you. Eileen said it would be. Are you giving me the green light?"

The green light. Eileen was my wife, the mother of Ellena. Perhaps I had caught something of His Excellency's devilish nonchalance, for I said quietly, "The green light. And may God have mercy on your soul!"

"But don't forget the terms of the surrender," His Excellency broke in quickly. "Immediacy. She is to remove herself from the premises. We trust you may be depended upon to notify us when the conditions have been fulfilled. We wish you good night, sir."

Van lingered a moment. He looked from His Excellency to me doubtfully, and looked back again, still with doubt.

"I'm sorry, Dave," he said. "God knows I never wanted this damned mess."

When he went out His Excellency filled our glasses—no, he didn't fill them. He accorded us each a thimbleful. He dusted his hands together lightly, a way he had of dismissing something he was through with.

"Now the next thing we have to turn our minds to," he said thoughtfully, "is how the devil we can get the Duchess back without losing something of our dignity."

XII. EILEEN

1

IT HAD been pretty hellish around the house. Ellena and Cliff gone, with their love and their low laughter. The Duchess gone, with her pretty airs and her snippy repartee.

His Excellency would start a story, and then, remembering there was no audience worthy of it, only Dave and me, break off in the middle of a sentence. I wasn't worried about Mother. If anybody on earth could look out for Number One, it was the Duchess. And I thought it was fair that Father should have it shoved smack down his throat that home wasn't a house but a woman.

I tried to play up to her as well as I could in her absence, as she had played up to us, Ellena and me, when we were tackling our difficult roles. I made myself as poor a substitute as possible. I put monkey wrenches in the household machinery, to interrupt its serenity. I was absent-minded. I didn't listen when His Excellency was talking. I appeared to forget things I hadn't forgotten at all. I flattered myself I was doing a neat little job and was sorry Gram and Ellena were not there to see it.

I was delighted when Father telephoned that he and Dave were staying downtown for dinner and probably would not return that night. I let Hortense go at once. For myself I foraged in the icebox and walked around the house with my tray, loving the unexpected aloneness. I thought of all the newspaper and radio pleas—men, men, give us men. Heavens! We had more men than we knew what to do with!

I was not worried. "If people just had a few more minutes to themselves, to be by themselves, things wouldn't always be in such a mess," I thought comfortably.

I decided to sit up all night, not to waste a minute of this blessed solitude. And hot upon this pleasant decision the doorbell rang. I waited. Inclination told me, "Don't answer it. Hide. Let it ring."

It rang again.

I went to the door, answering it because it was supposed to be answered and I always did what was supposed to be done. But not liking it.

I was shocked when I saw Van, shocked and ashamed. It was as if I had been caught red-handed in some unworthy act.

"You can't come in," I said quickly. "I'm alone. I'm entirely alone tonight."

"Yes, I know," he said. "That's what they said. That's why they sent me."

"That's what they said. That's why they sent me."

It didn't make sense. I stood back from the door and he came in.

"What are you talking about?" I asked.

"Don't you know? Didn't they tell you? The probation is off."

"Probation! What probation?"

I was frightened. I thought he was drunk. But he didn't act drunk.

"The two years," he explained. "The probation. Don't you remember? Trying us out for two years."

"Van, for heaven's sake, sit down and tell me what you are talking about."

"The probation, Eileen," he said with a sudden warm smile. "It's all off. Dave doesn't like it. He's through. He says it's all okay with him. Go ahead. We don't have to wait two years, Eileen. He gives us the green light."

"What does he know about it?"

"Everything. He knows everything. Mr. Dorchester knows too. They were both there. It's all right. They said it was all right; go right ahead. But they want you to leave here right away. Tonight. That's all right, too. You can take my apartment. I'll go to a hotel. They were very nice about it."

"Who told Dave?"

"Didn't you? . . . I don't know who told him. He knew all about it. He came over to my table and congratulated me. He took it very well, just as you said he would."

"Do you mean that Dave and my father told you . . . to go ahead . . . and for me to go away from here?"

"Yes. That's what they said. They are going somewhere, taking a long trip together. But they have to come back here first. That's why they want you to go tonight."

I couldn't get a coherent story out of him. I couldn't get any more than what he considered the vital point—it was all right with Dave and Father. And they wanted me to leave immediately. I was hot with shame.

"Van," I said, "it's my fault. I can't be like them, Mother and Ellena. It just isn't in me. I can't leave Dave. I can't ever leave Dave. I should have known it. It isn't because he was wounded and lost his leg. That hasn't anything to do with it. I knew the minute I saw him getting out of the car, before I knew what had happened, that Dave is my husband and I am a one-man woman and it is for the rest of my life. I tried, Van. I tried hard. It just isn't in me."

"But he's perfectly satisfied, Eileen. It's all right with him."

"It's not all right with me, Van. I'm sorry. But here I am and here I'm staying."

I managed to get out of him where they were, Dave and Father, and got rid of him as soon as I could. I went upstairs and dressed. I rehearsed my part, I rehearsed a thousand parts—how I should act, what I should say. Should I be noble and outraged? Humble and tearful? Or coldly martyred? I rehearsed them all but reached no decision.

Only one thing I knew. I was not going to spend a night alone in that ghastly house. Dave and Father were my men and I was entitled to their protection.

I couldn't get a taxi, so I went to the garage and got out our own car. I drove carefully, not to get myself killed on the way down and give Dave an easy out.

I did not stop at the desk. I had the room number. I didn't care. I did not resort to a ladylike touch on the door. I banged. I banged officially.

Father opened the door.

"You!" I said contemptuously. I swept by him, as well as one can sweep in abbreviated skirts and a sports coat.

Dave was sitting by the table. I stood still and looked at him.

"Let me tell you one thing," Father said firmly: "I will not give

you away. I was willing and even anxious to give you away the first time and you repulsed me. I will not give you away."

"Sit down, Father, and shut up," I said. "Dave, you've been drinking."

Dave met my eyes gravely but said nothing.

Father shoved up a chair for me, put ice in a glass, poured brandy over it. "I suppose you insist on ginger ale," he said disapprovingly. "Worst thing in the world for your stomach. But go ahead. Ruin it. It's your stomach."

Dave and I continued to glower at each other.

Father passed me a cigarette. I took it mechanically. He pulled out his lighter and snapped it open.

"Father, for heaven's sake, will you sit down and keep still?" I said. But I didn't look at him. I kept my eyes on Dave's eyes. I didn't want him to think I couldn't face him.

Father was unquenchable. He poured out a drink for himself and lighted a cigarette. He removed Dave's glass. "He's had enough," he remarked in a confidential but audible aside. But he sat down.

"Very well, Dave," I said. "I thought I was in love with Van. Maybe I was. I wouldn't know and I don't care. I don't want him. I'd rather be bored with you than excited with anybody else. As for that silly probation stuff—it's the first I'd heard of it. It hasn't anything to do with us anyhow. And it was never meant as a probation. The Duchess thought it up and it was very smart of her. She thought it up for Ellena and Cliff. They were out of love with each other and Mother thought if they would give themselves a little time they would be back in love again. I agreed with her. She used me as a kind of pawn to get Ellena to sign on the dotted line. A two-year stretch Gram called it, but it was elastic. Ellena and Cliff were in love again inside of two weeks. And it took only long enough for you to get out of the cab for me to know where I stood. I was your wife. I am your wife. Your wife I am remaining and if you try to pull a fast one and get rid of me, I'll sue you straight up to the Supreme Court."

"All this is interesting, perhaps, to some people, but very much beside the point," Father interrupted impatiently. "The point is—where is the Duchess and when is she coming home?"

I laughed. I laughed heartily. I wished Ellena and Gram could have been there to see the act. "I don't know where she is and I don't care. Wherever she is, I know she is doing all right by herself. And speaking of probations, dear Papa, you are on one—a nice private little probation of your own. A two-year stretch."

"What do you mean, a two-year stretch?"

"Well, darling, after she had cornered Ellena and put me on the hot spot, we threw it all smack in her face. We argued that she owed you two years of extramarital domestic ties in return for your far-flung diplomatic lies. I don't know the details but my inference is that she is going to accord them *in absentia*. She is a very good sport—in her own eccentric way."

"Where is she?"

"I don't know. And if I knew, I wouldn't tell you."

"Have you heard from her, Eileen?" Dave asked. They were his first words.

"No, I haven't, Dave. And I did not know she was leaving that day."

"You went up to the attic that night," he reminded me.

"Yes, I did. She did not mention that she was contemplating a trip to foreign parts. But she did say, Father," I said, speaking slowly, "that you are such a fool you think coming home means to a house. She said she would give you two years to find out that coming home means coming back to a woman instead of to a house."

"Two years!" he ejaculated. "Why, I may be dead in two years!"

"Well, if you're dead you won't be coming at all, so why worry?"

"Eileen, you know where she is. You know damned well where she is."

"I do not. And I've told you, if I knew I wouldn't give her away. She trusted Ellena and she trusted me. I for one, and maybe for the first time, trust her. . . . Dave, please pull your alcoholic wits together and come home. And you are not going home to anything. You're taking it with you."

Dave stood up.

"You can stay here if you like, Father," I said. "The room is already paid for and you haven't any home to go home to because there is nobody there."

"The house is paid for, too," he said. "And the beds are better."

We went down and drove home. We put our wraps in the hall closet and stood awkwardly at the foot of the stairs, looking at one another.

"Not that you deserve it, Father," I said. "But I am a weak-minded woman and not above giving you a hint."

"I knew you were lying all the time. I can't imagine how you turned out to be so dishonest. Your mother is extremely honorable."

"In her own way," I said, laughing. "I don't know where she is. But I have a little imagination. Ellena is going to have a baby."

They stood waiting.

When I said nothing Father exclaimed impatiently, "Go on! Go on! Where is she?"

"I don't know where she is. Didn't you hear me? Ellena is going to have a baby."

"We know, we know. But where is your mother?"

"I don't know. But Ellena is going to have a baby."

"What's that got to do with it?"

"Well, it must be the drinks you've had. You couldn't possibly be that dumb."

They looked dumbly at each other and back at me.

"You know how maudlin she is about vital statistics," I said impatiently. "And you know how she loves getting ahead of me. Do you think for one minute she will give me a chance to see my grandchild before she does?"

Father looked at me with sudden admiration and gratitude. "Son," he said, "maybe we have slightly underestimated the opposite sex. They are hard to get along with, they are not to be trusted, they have no sense of decent decorum. But they are so damned suspicious of each other, and so sleuthy at heart, that it would be hard getting along without them. Good night, my child."

XIII. ELLENA

1

SOMETIMES it was a little frightening, the thought that I was going to have a baby out there by myself, among all those strangers. For they were all strangers, except Cliff. Nice strangers, but still strange. I couldn't help reflecting sadly once in a while how if I were home Mother and Gram would hover over me, how Dad and His Excellency would turn handsprings to please me, how Hortense would slip me all the delicacies I was not allowed to have.

All the same the Lindleys, Cliff's family, were lovely to me. They did everything they could think of to please me. They wouldn't let me do any work at all. When I protested, they said I was doing something nobody else in the world could do—I was interesting blind young Bob. I couldn't argue against that.

The little children were sweet. They brought me flowers and showed their colored pictures and their cutouts. I admired them extravagantly. Gardy was very nice. She came in often, rather slyly, bringing me little treats.

"This," she would say, "you aren't supposed to have. But somebody always slipped it to me and it didn't do any harm. Still, if anything happens, please don't mention my name to Cliff."

I loved Bob. He stayed with me nearly all the time. Even when I was asleep. Except at night, of course. Cliff had bought, on partial payments, a house a couple of blocks down the street and it was being remodeled. I took my prescribed exercise by walking down every day and Bob walked with me.

He walked stumbingly around and felt things with his hand. "I don't understand this," he would say. "What is going on here?"

"I haven't the vaguest idea," I would assure him. "It's kind of square and extremely ugly and I can't imagine what they have in mind."

That pleased him. Because I, with eyes, didn't know any more about things than he did.

Bob was quieter than Cliff. He didn't talk much. And he was less witty.

When we were alone he talked more. Quietly. Not brilliantly. Without wisecracks. But I was glad he liked to sit with me.

"They tell me," he said once, "that sometime, after a while, my other senses will be sharpened to atone for my blindness. I don't know how true it is, but I try to exercise them as much as I can. I try to feel things with my fingers. And I listen. I'm not very discerning yet. The two sounds that stand out most are voices and footsteps. Your voice is lovely, Ellena. It's softer than music. . . . Did you ever notice footsteps? Women's footsteps, I mean. Any footsteps really. When they come clicking briskly, intent on doing what is to be done, like Mother's, you know there is solid efficiency behind them. When they come, like Gardy's, almost soundless, very soft but very sure, you know you aren't going to be disturbed and can go on being comfortable. Some heels—I won't mention names, but you have had the same visitors—come with hard sharp clicks and you sense purpose and aggression behind them."

"How do I walk?" I asked timidly. "I never really noticed footsteps."

"Very lightly," he said, smiling. "Very lightly. As if you are just tripping in and will be tripping off again almost immediately. Light and eager and going forward."

"My feet are bearing their private burdens right now," I said. "My soul may be light and eager and ready to go forward but my avoirdupois is beginning to weigh heavily on my heels."

Usually we did not talk much. I read to him a great deal.

Always before Cliff came home I took an hour to dress and primp up as well as I could, considering how badly I looked. At first I ordered Bob out of the room. Gradually, as realization came that he could not see, I permitted him to remain.

He teased me about my vanity. "I ought to be a very good catch for some woman some time," he said. "She won't have to waste time dolling up. And think of the money we'll save on cosmetics."

We laughed together.

At night, alone in my room with Cliff, I would put my fingers on his eyes and kiss them. "Cliff, if you had lost your eyes, you couldn't see our baby when it comes."

"I couldn't see you, Ellena." At the time that was no hardship!

One afternoon I was lying half asleep, Bob, the blessed lamb sitting beside me, when Gardy came to the door. "Ellena," she said breathlessly, "you have a caller. Do you feel like seeing anyone? Not that it will do any good if you don't because she says she is——"

"Hello, Ellena. What are you doing in bed? You have to exercise if you expect to retain the semblance of a normal figure."

The Duchess! Elegant, pleasant, wickedly gleeful at slipping one over on Mother.

Bob rose at once and offered to leave.

"Don't go," Gram said. "We haven't any secrets. And if we had, I dare say you are to be trusted. And if not, the sooner we find out the better. Ellena, you look a mess. Bob, you're lucky you don't have to look at her. . . . By the way. Turn your face a little more this way, Bob. . . . Ellena, I give you my word, he's better-looking than Cliff. You may call me Gram, Bob. It is the most dignified of my nomenclatures."

She sat down on the foot of the bed and regarded me severely. "It's high time I got here," she said. "Somebody has been slipping you things you are not entitled to."

Bob laughed. "You are absolutely right, Mrs. . . . Gram. Everybody that comes in slips her something she shouldn't have."

"No character. No character at all. You must be taking after Dave," she said.

"Gram, darling, please keep still a minute. What are you doing here? Where did you come from?"

"I had it in mind from the beginning," she said. "This is the last place in the world the silly fools would think of looking for me. . . . I hope it is a girl, Ellena. Boys upset me. We'll have to figure out a way to get something like Ellen into her name. Let me see. We have Eileen and Ellena. But we've got Ellenore and Ellana and Elysia to draw on. What do you think, Bob?"

She had registered at the hotel but the Lindleys would not hear of her returning there. They said they had plenty of room, did a little readjusting among themselves, and Cliff fetched her bags from the hotel. She smoothed her way into that household like a worn shoe. They adored her. And certainly she pepped them up. It was more than pep, it was pepper. I was almost jealous. Bob would actually leave me to go off some place with her and she was always going places—never any place that amounted to anything, but some place. A drugstore for tooth paste; a dime store for bobby pins; a department store for a zipper; or just for a walk to conserve her figure. And always she took Bob with her.

"Personally," she told him, "I consider you an extremely lucky individual. You won't have to go through life getting your glasses changed, as I do. Paying for them and immediately breaking or losing them, and knowing all the time that everybody considers you old and wornout just because you can't tell a house from a truck without them. Extremely lucky!"

She could hardly wait for the baby. She scolded me every day and demanded to know what I was waiting for, now she was there. Did I think she could waste the next two years waiting for something to happen?

We were in my room one evening, Cliff and I on the bed, Gram and Bob on the big chaise, when the doorbell rang. We paid no attention because it rang often. Someone answered and there were low voices. Still we paid no attention.

Nobody but Gram. She stood up suddenly, alertly listening. "Him," she said.

She was right. It was His Excellency.

Gardy escorted him upstairs. He kissed me affectionately. "I came for the christening," he said. "I enjoy formal functions like christenings, weddings and deaths."

"You're a little ahead of the calendar," Gram reminded him acidly. "There's nothing to christen yet, and weddings and deaths certainly postdate the christening."

"Good timing. Perfect timing. I should not like having to apologize for belatedness. If it's a boy, I think we'd better name it for me.

We've got too damn many Ellens running around loose now."

"If it's a boy we'll call it Allan," Gram said fiercely. "That's as masculine as you can get with Ellen."

"We could call it 'ell-'n-'igh water," His Excellency said. "And highly appropriate, in my opinion."

The Lindleys were fascinated. Mother Lindley had come in, and they were all tucked away somewhere, on dressing stools and chairs and the foot of the bed. It was too bad the babies were asleep and had to miss it.

"You will have absolutely nothing to do with the christening of my great-grandchild," Gram said firmly. "You would crash a champagne bottle over its little cranium. An empty bottle, of course. You would take care of that detail beforehand."

"I brought It a present," Grandfather said. "I brought It my war bonds. I don't expect to live long enough to cash them myself—not the kind of life I'm being led at present. I brought It that one of yours, too, Duchess—the one in the secret drawer of your private desk."

"That's my drawer and my desk, and incidentally, it's my war bond. You had absolutely no business prying into my private desk and drawer and war bond. . . . That's diplomats for you," she explained to the speechless Lindleys, "lying with their lips and snooping with their hands. Thank God, Cliff is an engineer. An engineer can find plenty to do with his hands without snooping into other people's desks. It's idle hands that make diplomats out of otherwise respectable citizens."

Cliff and I were so happy we could hardly stand it. He was up beside me on the bed hugging me, and we laughed ourselves almost into hysteria while Gram and His Excellency went on sneering politely at each other, and the rest of the Lindleys listened, rapt and attentive.

Gardy brought up a trayful of cookies and glasses with a bottle of homemade wine, and she did it so swiftly that I knew she was as low-minded as I, unwilling to miss an exciting syllable.

"Not wishing to appear boastful," Grandfather said, "I hope I may remark in passing that it is a good thing I got home when I did.

Otherwise, Cliff my lad, you would by this time be paying homage to a brand new father-in-law."

I picked myself out of Cliff's arms and sat up attentively. I glanced once at Gram. She didn't seem to move but she stiffened; she stiffened without moving.

"Of course you're young," Grandfather went on quietly. "You can take it. When you are a little older, a switch in fathers-in-law will be more disconcerting. But for the time being, I broke it up. Sad, very sad. The pernicious influence of the Duchess, I suppose. She always had a bad influence over our child. Headstrong. Willful. That child did her own picking in the first place with no help from us. Did all right, too. . . . Didn't do too badly the next time. . . . Good-looking. I'll say that for him. . . . Drunk. Very drunk. But good-looking. . . . She inherited that from me. I always incline to good looks."

He stopped there. He lighted a cigarette slowly—one of his affectations of elegance. Gram sat perfectly motionless, erect, attentive.

I couldn't stand it. "What happened, Grandfather?"

"Nothing. Nothing at all. Dave and I moved out on her and went down to the Shoreham. . . . No, it wasn't the Shoreham. It was the Wardman Park. It was the Shoreham where they almost had the duel. But not quite. . . . That's right, it was the Wardman. We sent this man—Van, that's his name, Vander something or other—we sent him up to tell her to vacate the premises. But we sobered him up first. He was disgustingly inebriated."

"You—did—what?" Gram asked softly. I was glad she was able to speak; I wasn't.

"Sobered him up. We had him take a cold shower and a Bromo Seltzer. I was annoyed with Eileen but I really couldn't countenance her eloping with an inebriated gentleman. Especially when she was not safeguarded by a divorce."

"But, Grandfather, what happened?"

"Nothing. Nothing at all. I think she gave him the air. I think so. All I know is that she came down to the Shoreham—no, it was the Wardman—she came down and took Dave and me by a couple of

ears and administered a tongue-lashing that would have put a fish-wife to shame and escorted us home. All just as I planned, of course. But I must say I consider it grossly unfair to leave that sort of thing to a man, even one with well-known and widely exploited talents for diplomacy. I consider that woman messes are women's business, and not worth wasting genius on. But what can you expect, in this war-torn world? Women gallivanting all over the country, neglecting their obvious duties, having babies at inopportune times and places. . . ." He pulled himself up shortly. "Although I must say it was considerate of you to get out of my room. And bed. I like babies. I heartily approve of them. Any place but in my bed."

Gram and I were able at last to look away from him and look at each other—a gloating look, absolutely gloating.

"Where are they now, Grandfather?" I managed to ask.

"In my house, of course. Where else would they be? They pretend they are waiting for tenants to vacate but in my opinion they are stalling for time. I don't want to upset you but it is my impression that your parents, with only three legs between them, plan to park on me indefinitely. . . . You may as well face it, my dear," he said to Gram. "That is my impression."

I was half-suffocated with excitement but I managed to get a few words through. "Did you tell them you were coming here?"

"Certainly not. I told them I was ordered back to Russia on a delicate secret mission. That's why I brought the brief cases."

We were speechless for a while. Breathless, too.

"Mother," Cliff exclaimed, "be brave, be noble, try to bear up under it. Learn to look the facts in the face. The fact is that I have married a family of imbeciles. They are beautiful. They are brilliant. In all ways delightful. But crazy. Every last one of them. Hold a good thought for the coming grandchild. It may take after our side of the family."

"I hope so," Gram said cordially. "It would be nice, after all these years, to have one person in the family who could talk sense and be sensibly talked to."

"I hope so, too," Grandfather said. "You seem a very safe family to me. There's nothing safe in our line of Ellens. If we could be

sure It would take after me—no! We could never be sure. Nobody could live down our variegated Ellens. One of them maybe, but not all.”

The Lindleys were lovely. They tried to figure out a way for Grandfather to stay at the house too and Grandfather wanted to stay, which made it harder. They knew he was divorced from Gram but he did not act at all divorced. Ostensibly, he remained at the hotel. Ostensibly. But literally he was at the house all the time. And the way everybody catered to him and hung on his words made me shiver in my maternity clothes for what Gram would have to put up with later.

He and Bob were bosom friends almost immediately. “It’s too bad you aren’t deaf,” Grandfather said. This was just after he had invited Bob to go to Washington and live with him and the Duchess. “We are very nice to live with, especially if one is blind and could be deaf. However, don’t let the eardrums bother you. The Duchess will have them out of working order in no time.”

Things went along swimmingly for four days. And it was Sunday. We were in the living room, being nice and polite—rather gay, too, because of Grandfather, and maybe a little because of the homemade wine.

A car pulled up to the curb.

“That looks like our car,” I said.

It was our car. And it was Mother and Dad.

Extra poundage and all, I was on my way. I took them both into my arms because I couldn’t bear to divide them. We stood there, hugging one another miscellaneously. Eventually we got back into the house, still hugging. The long-suffering Lindleys were startled but game.

His Excellency did not like it. “Don’t you know there’s a war on and you are supposed to conserve tires? Where did you get the gas?” he demanded indignantly.

“The dimpled digit charmed them,” Dad said cheerfully. “They gave us enough to get home on, too.”

Mother gave Gram a haughty look. “It’s a good thing for my grandchild that It waited until I got here,” she said. “If It had per-

mitted you to put this over on me, I would have disinherited It."

I was so happy I could have cried. But I did not cry. I went to the couch and sat beside Bob. I took his hand and held it hard. "Bob," I said, "the Blitz has come. Blitz, Incorporated. Hang onto me, Bob, hang hard. I am on the verge of tears."

"Don't cry, Ellena," he said. "Their voices belie their words."

He was a sweet child.

Mother and Dad had already checked in at the hotel and left their luggage there. They tried to talk Gram into moving down with them, to complete the family party.

"It would not be decent," she said flatly. "I have been compromised too much already. But I will not go to the extreme length of putting up at hotels with extraneous gentlemen."

His Excellency was anything but extraneous. He was so doggedly present Mother and I had to resort to subterfuge to get Gram alone for a minute. Mother made several mild tackles that failed completely. I rallied to the rescue with the plaintive remark that I was afraid my girdle was not the last up-to-the-minute model because it seemed to be doing the right things for me in the wrong places. Naturally they insisted on immediate inspection. His Excellency did not like it but grudgingly submitted to being edged neatly out of the room.

"You are doing nicely, Duchess," Mother began, as the door was closing. "But don't expend all your talent on the first lap. You've got a long way to go."

"Two years is a long time," I added. "Very, very long. Why, your great-grandchild will be almost ready for kindergarten before you can legitimately side-step the armistice."

She took it cheerfully. "I am willing to make great personal sacrifice in order to legitimize our great-grandchild. For the sake of our fourth generation, I will remarry the brute. But it has got to be preceded by a proposal. Preferably on his knees. You may drop a hint to that effect, if you like. . . . Since he is so very fussy about his wardrobe, I will relinquish the knee proviso."

Mother and I tried every way we could think of to drop the

needful hint. But it is hard, hinting marriage to one who considers himself completely married. His Excellency, a stickler for form on most points, simply did not consider that preliminary steps were required. He was there. And there he was going to stay until the Duchess was ready to go home with him.

I think in the end Dad gave it to him straight. Mother said they went down to the bar one night and stayed a long time. The next morning His Excellency did not arrive at the Lindley domicile until nearly noon. Usually he was there in ample time for family breakfast. When he came, he was quiet. He was quiet and pale. He looked shell-shocked. He did not make speeches, did not wisecrack, did not tell stories. He sat there frowning a little, smoking steadily. That was a clear indication of mental disturbance. He was temperate in all his vices. He claimed that moderation was the first mark of a gentleman. But that day he smoked immoderately.

For two days the unnatural calm continued. Then he rose to it. And, as we might have anticipated, did it publicly, when we were all together in the living room after dinner.

He cleared his throat. "Duchess," he said portentously, "I have been making inquiries and I find they have a very good minister of the gospel here, duly authorized to administer last rites and sacraments. It seems to me that, at your age, with at least half your painted toenails already in the inevitable grave, and in view of the imminent arrival of a new and innocent generation, you should abandon your life of seclusion if not sin and unite with me in the holy bonds of acrimony. I mean matrimony. Or are they synonymous?"

Mother and Dad, Cliff and I, went off into peals of happy laughter. And Dad looked smugly gratified, like the reaper who has sown good seed smirking over his harvest.

"Stripping your words of their diplomatic persiflage," Gram said quietly, "is that remark to be construed as a proposal?"

"It is. And it was all your fault that we got that damned divorce in the first place. If a man can't remark, in his own home, which is his castle, that he has been married too long and what matrimony needs is the reviving tonic of a first-class divorce, then where is all this freedom we think we've been fighting for? However, least said,

soonest mended. Hence, as usual, I say nothing. Will you marry me?"

"In order to give our approaching great-grandchild a legitimate though reprehensible ancestor, I will."

Cliff and I were very happy that night. We lay for hours, close in each other's arms. Sometimes we laughed together, without need for words.

"A family of gorgeous imbeciles," he said once. "I hope It inherits a little of it. Not much, but some. I hope It takes after you."

Time! Time! That's all it takes.

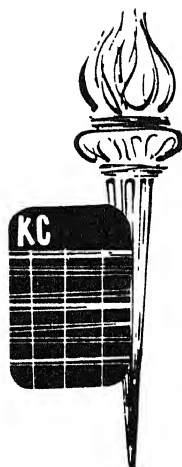
A little waiting, a little love, a little patience.

And Time.

I loved him with all my heart, with every breath and every pulse beat and every thought. I loved It too, because It was his. His and ours.

Just a little Time!

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